



Echoes of the Past (Gift of the Ancients #6)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Danger brought them together.

Love will make them unstoppable.

Zeke thought his new power was a dud.

Gifted with psychometry by an ancient and magical djinn, he can see the past just by touching objects.

It's not as flashy as his Special Forces teammates' more tactile powers, but when Zeke finds clues in seemingly insignificant objects, he realizes his gift might just be the key to solving a brutal double murder one that shattered the life of the woman he's been secretly admiring ever since she arrived on base.

Celine Santini is no stranger to danger.

As a selkie shapeshifter, she's fierce and graceful, both on land and in the sea.

But the pain of losing her parents to a brutal and unsolved murder still haunts her.

Now, working on the Top Secret military base under her grandfather's watchful eye, she's tried to get over her grief and move on.

But when Zeke uncovers new evidence, the hunt for her parents' killer reignites with a fiery vengeance.

Their quest for justice becomes a race against time as they confront dark forces, black magic, and a cunning female mage willing to do anything to protect her evil coven's secrets.

As danger looms, Zeke and Celine discover a bond that transcends magic and fear—a love that just might be their ultimate weapon.

But can they overcome the evil that threatens to destroy them both? Or will the shadows of the past claim them before they get a chance at happiness?

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“I don’t like Kettering either, little brother, but we need the money.”

The stranger’s deep voice echoed through Zeke’s mind as he touched one finger to the object on the table in front of him.

Psychometry was the fancy name for the dubious power that had been gifted to him in the ancient city of Babylon.

It meant that he could divine the history of an object simply by touching it.

He didn’t have the greatest control over this new power yet, which was why he’d taken to wearing gloves most of the time.

He’d had one too many jarring visions of the violent pasts of certain objects.

He didn’t need any more of those nightmare images in his mind.

The gloves stopped him from picking up unwanted imagery from everyday objects.

Everyone had agreed that he should reserve his gift for use on things that needed to be scanned for operational purposes, and in the meantime, he was working with the scientists and doctors that had joined their team to try to figure out both the limits of his new ability and how to control it better.

Today’s exercise had him hooked up to a brainwave monitor that would record any changes in his brain activity during one of his visions of the past. The object to be scanned was something that had been taken from a group of hammerhead shark

shifters who had been captured while trying to assault Dr. Lynn Tucker, who was observing this test along with the rest of the research team.

She was recently engaged to Rick Lovelace, the medical doctor who was part of their Green Beret unit and could now heal the worst of injuries with just a thought.

He was in the room too, right there alongside Lynn as they watched the readouts from the many electrodes attached to Zeke's head.

Zeke was sure he looked ridiculous, but he knew he needed help harnessing this new ability.

He hadn't really gotten anywhere on his own except the need to accessorize his uniform with gloves, which looked downright weird in the summer.

He'd requisitioned a number of different styles of work gloves and kept a pair on him at all times. Just in case.

He touched the object on the table, bracing against what he might see.

It was a handwritten note on a small card that one of the prisoners had kept in his wallet.

Ostensibly, it had been written by the mysterious arms merchant who had hired the shark team to go after Zeke's unit.

Abdul Kettering. They knew only the bare bones about the reclusive billionaire.

Zeke hoped they might learn something more through his unique talent.

The moment he touched the small piece of paper, images came to his mind. He

recounted them for those who were watching.

“Liam Kinkaid handed this to Rick, who placed it here. Before that, one of the shifters—the rangy guy named Oscar who I think is a werewolf—got it from one of the sharks during the interrogation. It was the leader of the shark shifters. He carried this with him in his wallet. Yes, I know we all know that,” Zeke said, stating the obvious with a sigh, then went on.

“But he said something to his brother when he put the card in his wallet. I can see them talking and hear their words. He said, ‘I don’t like Kettering either, little brother, but we need the money.’ The brother agreed and asked why his brother was keeping the card.

He told him, ‘ Insurance. Kettering’s fingerprints are on this card, as is some of his DNA.

’ Apparently, Kettering sneezed on it before handing it to the head shark.

Yeah, I can see that now. Kettering was writing out these coordinates and something tickled his nose.

He couldn’t control the sneeze, and it sprayed on the card, though he didn’t really seem to notice it.

He was more concerned about germs, I think.

I suspect our buddy Abdul is a bit of a germaphobe.

He made the shark wait until he got a disinfectant wipe out and swabbed his hands.

And he refused to shake hands with the shark guy.

” Zeke paused for a moment, closing his eyes to see more clearly.

“Before that, I see a male assistant putting this card, which was in a stack of others, into a holder on Abdul’s desk.

Before that, it’s a manufacturing plant in Germany, I think, where the cards were made. Nothing notable.”

“Can you see any details about the assistant?” Rick asked.

“Yeah, I see his face. I can draw him,” Zeke replied confidently. He’d always enjoyed drawing and creating art. It had come in handy a time or two in his work too. Like in this instance, when he needed to convey an image only he could see to his team.

The assistant might be a way in. Or not. But they had precious little intel on the illegal arms magnate. Every little bit of information they could add to the very thin file they had been compiling would help.

Zeke removed his finger from the paper and sat back. He’d only touched the very edge of it. Rick came over to the table and used forceps to put the card back into a plastic bag.

“Now that we know who sneezed all over this, we’ll begin the hunt for his DNA and fingerprints.

We have the prints from the sharks, so we can eliminate those and isolate Kettering’s.

” Rick looked pleased. That sort of biometric information was hard to come by for a recluse like Kettering, so this was a major step forward in their investigation.

“How are you feeling?” Rick asked, looking Zeke over carefully. “Any fatigue?”

“Nope,” Zeke replied, leaning back in the chair, ready for more testing.

It was boring, for the most part, but the past few minutes had reinvigorated him a bit. The team wouldn’t have known about the possible DNA and fingerprints if not for Zeke’s somewhat lame gift.

He hadn’t really said anything to the other guys, but Zeke sometimes felt that he’d gotten the wimpiest of the gifts handed out by that magical djinn.

The rest of the unit had cool, useful abilities like super strength, healing, seeing the future, walking through walls, and calling lightning out of the sky, among others.

Zeke still wasn’t sure his particular ability was anything other than a party trick.

Useful, sometimes, but not helpful at all during combat situations.

He might be an archaeologist by training, but he wasn’t a desk jockey. He preferred to be out in the field, doing things. Always had. Which was why he had gone into the military in the first place.

Zeke had never thought that his advanced studies in archaeology would’ve come in handy in his military career, but they had.

Much to his surprise. He’d been recruited into a very special unit, and had been able to use his knowledge of the past to help protect the future.

At least, that’s the way he’d seen it. But now, everything had changed.

Ever since that strange encounter in the ancient city of Babylon, he and his team were

being hunted.

They hadn't been on a real mission in far too long.

They'd been confined to a secret military base off the coast of Long Island for months now.

And although they'd had to fight a few times to protect themselves and those who had joined them here—a few of the guys had gotten married or engaged recently, and their wives and girlfriends had come to stay—the unit hadn't been assigned any real-world missions in far too long.

In fact, their entire future in the military was up in the air right now.

They were being studied. Like lab rats. Their new abilities made them a liability, in some respects.

They weren't just soldiers anymore. Not that they had been ordinary troops, in any case.

They'd been among the best of the best. A specialized Green Beret unit created for specific situations in which their various fields of expertise could be utilized.

Their team not only had an M.D. bioweapons expert, but also a linguist, geologists, archaeologists, and other experts on antiquities and other arts and sciences.

They hadn't just been any run-of-the-mill Special Forces team. They'd been used on highly specialized missions all over the world. But after that last mission, that had all come to a screeching halt. Now, they were the ones being studied and observed. They were the ones being hunted.

“I gathered a few more objects, if you have time and energy to give them a read,” Rick said, drawing Zeke’s attention back to the matter at hand. The unit’s doctor retrieved a plastic bag from one of the desks along the far wall of the room and brought it over.

“Is this more stuff from the prisoners?” Zeke asked, looking at the odd assortment of plastic bags containing various items, including a small stuffed animal. That surely hadn’t come from the prisoners.

“No. Just a few odds and ends I gathered from various people. A random test of your abilities, if you will,” Rick replied.

“This ought to be fun,” Zeke muttered as Rick took the stuffed animal out first and placed it on the table.

Zeke did his best to clear his mind before touching one fingertip to the small, furry bunny.

He frowned, reaching for and grabbing the bunny in his full hand.

“This thing is new. I see you getting it out of a package. Before that, it was on a store shelf, and nobody has really touched it enough to leave an impression but you. The ladies who sewed it were Chinese. Looks like a typical sweat shop on the other side of the world. Before that, it was just fabric. And before that...nothing.”

Rick retrieved the bunny from Zeke, taking it in his hand and stuffing it into a gift bag he’d had behind a desk. It had a big pink bow on it and tissue paper peeping out from the top. What the heck?

“Good. Casey will be relieved. This is for the baby. I just wanted to be sure there was no bad juju on it,” Rick explained.

“That’s what I’m here for. To check for bad juju on baby toys.” Zeke sat back with a gusty sigh.

His gift was lame. The other guys were just too kind to say it out loud. What were they even doing here, trying to test what he could do? It was obvious. And the next best thing to useless.

Though, learning about Kettering’s DNA and prints on that card was pretty cool.

Still, it wasn’t earth shattering, exactly.

A good forensic examination would have turned up the prints and probably the DNA anyway.

They just might not have known whose prints or DNA they were.

At least not right away. So, his gift was useful in that respect, at least.

“Ready for another one?” Rick asked, eyeing Zeke closely.

“Yeah, no sweat. Ready when you are.” He might as well. He had nothing better to do this morning. Might as well prove to everyone just how stupid his gift really was.

“Okay, how about...this one?”

Rick seemed to pick a plastic bag at random and opened it, shaking the contents out onto the table in front of Zeke. It was a guitar pick.

Intrigued, Zeke reached out a finger and jumped back at the blast of sound in his mind. He looked up at Rick and frowned.

“What?” Rick demanded.

“I just heard a wicked guitar solo. This thing was used in a coliseum-sized concert not too long ago,” Zeke explained.

Braced for the music, he touched the edge of the small plastic object again.

He listened for a moment, enjoying the experience of being at the concert in his mind, then reached for more.

“The lead guitarist used it only briefly. He had a row of these taped to his mic stand and was tossing them out to the pretty girls in the crowd in front of him from time to time. Before that, the roadie got them out of a box and stuck them up on the tape. Before that, it was punched out of a plastic sheet that had been printed with the band’s logo and the guitarist’s name.

” Zeke put the guitar pick back in the little plastic bag and tossed it back across the table to Rick. “Next.”

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Rick pulled a gold locket out of his pocket. “I found this earlier, and though I could’ve asked around to find the owner, I knew we were going to do this today, so I thought...”

“All right.” Zeke almost sighed. This was all his gift was good for, really. They might as well put him in charge of the lost and found.

Rick laid the locket on the table, and Zeke approached cautiously. Such a personal item might have unforeseen emotions imbued into it. He touched the chain and saw immediately how Rick had found it.

“It was on the floor of the cafeteria, under the table by the door to the kitchen. You found it as you were finishing breakfast and heading here. It’s Celine’s,” Zeke said as he saw the image of the pretty blonde who worked in the kitchen of their building.

“Celine Santini?” Rick asked, referring to one of the few civilians on base who worked doing food prep in their mess hall.

Zeke nodded. He had an image of Celine sitting at the same table earlier this morning, having taken the locket off to look at the tiny photos inside.

That had been just a few hours ago. And she’d been crying.

Zeke didn’t really want to share the intensely personal images in his mind.

The strong shifter woman he’d come to know a bit over the past few weeks had a core of steel.

But seeing the photos in this locket that was clearly special to her, had made her vulnerable in a way he hadn't expected.

He delved deeper and realized immediately why.

"The locket contains photos of her parents," he said in a casual tone. "She usually wears it, but this morning before the cafeteria opened, she took it off to look at their photos. Today is the anniversary of their deaths," he added in a somber tone.

He wasn't going to say more. He would not reveal her pain any more than he already had. He respected her too much to do that.

"Oh." Rick's mouth tightened. Every member of the unit had lost loved ones. Rick understood. "That's rough. She seems like a nice girl."

Zeke picked up the locket and put it in his shirt pocket. "She is. I'll give it back to her once we're done here."

Zeke didn't go into the fact that he was more than a little attracted to the pretty blonde.

Any excuse to talk to her was welcome, but returning her locket was important.

He knew she was in a bad place emotionally today, of all days.

He'd felt the grief and sorrow that she'd felt as she'd gazed at the little photos.

She would be devastated to think she'd lost her locket and that last remaining link to her parents.

He had also gleaned a bit about the tragedy that had struck her folks.

They'd been murdered, and Celine had a lot of anger and guilt about it.

Anger that those who'd done the deed had never been caught, and guilt about not being there when her parents had needed her.

Though she probably would have died right along with them, she had a vague feeling that if only she'd been there, she might've been able to stop the heinous crime in some way.

Zeke realized it bothered him that those who had killed Celine's parents hadn't been caught and wondered if there was anything he could do to identify them.

Maybe his gift might help, if he could get access to something that had been at the crime scene.

Or, maybe, he could do some good, old-fashioned investigating to see if he could bring any new information to light.

He'd talk to Mandy when he had a moment.

She was Wil's fiancée, but she'd been a police detective in Seattle and had joined the unit as a consultant to help with the investigation into why they were being hunted, and by whom.

He could ask her for pointers on how to investigate a murder.

He was sure she'd be willing to coach him.

She was good people and he was happy for his friend and brother-in-arms to have found such a nice woman to share his life with.

Zeke couldn't ask her to investigate herself, but he had a lot of free time on his hands now that the unit was sidelined here on the island.

There were only so many hours that could be filled with testing of his lame gift, physical training and guard duty.

The nights, in particular, ran long when he didn't draw the night shift.

He didn't require much, and there were a lot of dark hours when the rest of the world—except those who were on duty—were asleep.

Maybe he could fill some of that time with research into the crime.

Though he wasn't sure he'd be able to find anything useful while stuck here on the island, and he couldn't go ashore to the crime scene.

At least, he didn't think such a trip would be sanctioned.

Every man in the unit was being hunted by foreign agents, and in recent months, they had only been allowed off the base for very limited amounts of time, and only in extreme circumstances.

Too many people around them had already been hurt trying to get to them.

In particular, the women who were involved with members of the unit had been targeted.

Casey had been kidnapped and taken out to sea where Hal had rescued her with the help of a friendly pod of dolphins.

And, most recently, Lynn had been shot on her way to join the unit as an advisor.

Rick had healed her, of course, but if that bullet had been just a bit to the left, it might have killed her before Rick had a chance to work his magic.

Though, come to think of it, Zeke wasn't really sure about that.

He'd seen Rick do some pretty amazing things since they'd all been changed.

As the unit's doctor, he'd saved the life of just about every guy in the unit at one time or another.

Only, now he could do it with the healing touch of his hands and whatever magic had been gifted to him by that mysterious djinn they'd encountered in the desert.

Zeke touched the next object Rick put before him and rattled off what he saw.

It was a pencil that had been used just that morning to make a grocery list in the kitchen.

From the list of ingredients, it looked like they would be having lasagna sometime very soon, if not tonight.

That news was greeted with enthusiasm by everyone in the room.

The chef who ran their cafeteria was excellent and made killer lasagna that everyone loved.

He was also a big bruiser of a master chief who happened to be Celine's grandfather, though he looked barely old enough to be her dad.

Shifters just aged differently than regular people.

Zeke was learning, alongside the rest of his unit, that shifters spent most of their lives in their prime, living a very robust few centuries if they didn't die in action.

They also didn't get sick. Not like normal human beings.

They had fast metabolisms and super sharp senses.

They ate more than anyone he knew and stayed fit regardless of how much they consumed.

He suspected the extreme energy needed to shapeshift used up a lot of those calories, as did the lean muscle sported by their animal forms and all the physical activity they did on a daily basis.

The shifter soldiers on this base were all lean, mean, fighting machines by anyone's definition, and they had superior skills.

Of course, Zeke and his unit were elite Green Berets, so even before they'd been gifted with magical abilities, they could have worked alongside the shifters any day. In fact, they had worked alongside shifters without even knowing such beings existed, for years.

This base, however, had been established and manned solely by shifters until Zeke's unit had needed a place to land.

They'd been stashed here and put under the supervision of the base commander, Lester Kinkaid, who was himself a shifter, and the leader of all the shifters on this base and, likely, in the entire Navy.

Perhaps every shifter in every branch of the military.

Zeke wasn't really sure how far old Lester's influence stretched.

Alpha, they called it. Zeke had learned that shifters answered to their Alpha, and for the military shifters, ol' Lester was it.

Zeke's mind drifted as Rick gave him a few more objects to touch. Nothing was all that interesting, and he realized Rick was going easy on him for some reason. Zeke had enough.

"Why are you only giving me new things?" he asked after the last item. "This isn't a real test, Doc. We need to see what I can do with something with a bit of history."

"Like that urn you touched back in Baghdad?" Rick countered, one eyebrow rising in challenge.

They both knew that Zeke had passed out after touching a truly ancient urn that had been used to hold the blood of several warlords' enemies in ancient times.

The violence and cruelty that object had seen had overwhelmed Zeke's senses and caused him to black out.

He still winced at the memory, but he had to learn to deal with such things if he was going to be able to function in the field again at all.

"I need to learn how to control it, Doc," Zeke said quietly. "We both know that."

Rick sighed, then looked down. He shook his head slowly, then moved to a satchel that rested on his desk. He removed something from it and brought it over to Zeke's table.

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“All right. Just remember you asked for it,” Rick warned him, putting a small, carved stone in front of Zeke.

“Tread carefully. This was found at a crime scene. A violent one where people died. The investigators thought the perpetrator lost it during the action. Likely, it fell out of a piece of jewelry, since it’s flat on one side and shows signs of having been set in a bezel around the domed side.

The engraving has been identified as a Latin inscription summoning something evil, though Commander Kinkaid didn’t tell me any more than that.

He left it up to me to determine if you were ready to try this.

They’ve lost the trail and are hoping you might be able to point them in the right direction.

It’s a long shot, but if you want to give it a try... ”

“Of course I do,” Zeke replied immediately.

He figured the worst that could happen was that he could pass out again.

He’d already been humiliated like that once.

If it happened again, so be it. If not, he might actually be able to help catch some bad guys.

He missed making a contribution to the unit.

He missed being out in the world, doing important things.

Fighting the good fight. If this was all he could do now, by golly, he'd try his best.

"Go slow," was Rick's last bit of advice.

Bracing himself, Zeke reached out and lightly touched just the tip of his finger to the object.

His eyes closed, and he saw Liam Kinkaid picking up the stone from a bloody floor.

Two people lay dead nearby—a man and a woman.

A mated pair, Zeke somehow thought. He reported what he saw to those watching.

The scene shifted to earlier. The stone was set in a silver bracelet that singed the flesh of the male who fought against the person wearing the bracelet.

From the arm he saw wearing the bracelet, Zeke surmised the person was female.

Dark-skinned. The skin wasn't wrinkly, so possibly a youngish woman.

With claw-like fingernails painted blood-red and hands coated in actual blood.

"The female of the pair of victims was already dead. The male was still fighting and was burned by the bracelet as he wrenched it off the woman's arm and threw it against the wall.

That's when the stone popped out. The woman killed him with some kind of magic

strike that I can't quite make out, and then she had to flee because others were arriving.

She didn't have time to retrieve the stone, but she scooped up the silver part of the bracelet on her way out.

The stone had skittered under the couch, and it would've taken a lot of time to find and retrieve, which she didn't have.

The bracelet itself was in her path, so she just took that and ran. ”

“Can you see anything else about the woman?” Rick asked. Zeke lifted his finger from the stone and blinked his eyes open to see that everyone in the room was taking notes.

“Tight black curls. Long hair. It brushed the upper part of her arm and swung in front of her. It had blood in it too, and she seemed to enjoy that.” Zeke shook his head.

“That gal is one sick puppy. She reveled in her kills. I think she's a serial killer, though I understand female serial killers are rare. ”

“Not among magic folk,” Lynn spoke up from next to Rick.

She was the unit's authority on magic, as well as being a medical researcher of some repute.

Lynn had been raised with magic, and her grandmother was a powerful mage.

“There's an old saying among magic users.

The female of the species is more deadly than the male .

Some of the most vicious and prolific of murderers in magical history have been women.

Case in point: the sorceress Elspeth, known as the Destroyer of Worlds.

She didn't get that nickname for no reason. ”

Zeke nodded to Lynn. “Understood. Don't ever underestimate a woman with magic.”

“Can you tell anything more about the stone itself?” Lynn asked.

Zeke nodded, closing his eyes and trying again, reaching out to touch the stone once more.

“The bracelet was given to the dark-haired woman by her mentor. I can't see the mentor's face, but it was another woman.

She had a matching bracelet, and there's another one, just like it, that the mentor gave to someone else.

Another female student, I think. She made them especially for the three of them.

They were supposed to link up somehow and maybe amplify their power in some way.

” Zeke turned his head, his eyes still closed, trying to figure out what he was seeing and feeling.

“Who made them? Can you see that?” Lynn's voice came to Zeke as he refocused his inner eye. “And how long ago were they made?”

“Not long,” he answered promptly. He could tell that just by how quickly he’d gotten to the manufacturing part of the item’s history.

“I see a workshop in a...castle?” Zeke tried to look closer.

“Yeah, it’s a castle. An old one. I think it’s in Europe.

There’s nothing in that style on this side of the world with that much age to it.

The woman who made the bracelets also carved the stones and she did so while muttering.

No, chanting. She was chanting something...

It sounds really foul. Unintelligible language to me, but it sounds kind of evil. ”

“Can you repeat any of the words?” Rick asked, but Lynn interjected immediately.

“Don’t say them in order. Just give us a few highlights here and there, and maybe mix them up a bit. We don’t want to accidentally summon something,” she cautioned.

This was getting weirder and weirder. Zeke listened hard and picked out a few of the strange sounding words, saying them out of order, just in case.

“That’s enough,” Lynn almost shouted, then her tone subsided. “I think I know what this is. I recognize the names of several demonic powers, though I don’t know all the words.”

“No worries. Carter knows every language. He can probably fill in the blanks later,” Rick said while Zeke scrunched up his eyes, trying to note more details about the surroundings, looking for any clue that might help them narrow down the location.

Then he saw something he recognized. A silhouette out the window of the workshop that looked a lot like a place he had been. Bingo.

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“It’s near Ramstein,” Zeke said, breaking into the brief silence that had fallen. “I can see the city. I’ve been there.”

“So have I,” Rick said, his tone grim. “And I think I know exactly the castle you’re seeing.”

Zeke pulled his hand away from the stone and opened his eyes, nodding. “I think I do too.”

There had only been one building like that in the area of the giant air base.

And after seeing the direction in which the city lay from the window, he knew the direction in which to look for such a structure.

It made sense. It was the castle they’d all joked about being Dracula’s lair or something equally silly.

It was easily seen from certain parts of the base, sitting on a hill overlooking the area.

“Kettering.” Zeke grumbled the word. The man was scum. That his name had popped up more than once today probably wasn’t a coincidence. The ancient seat of the Kettering family was on that hill, far above Ramstein Air Base. Everyone in Special Forces knew it and couldn’t do a damned thing about it.

So what if Kettering’s illegal arms were out there in the world, being used against them?

So what if he was allied with terrorists and other forces of darkness?

He was rich, and that made him all but immune in this modern world where money spoke louder than actions sometimes.

At least among the human governments and bureaucrats.

“Wait.” Lynn shook her head. “You’re telling me this stone was made in the Kettering Castle?”

Zeke nodded at her. “By a woman, in a workshop, in Kettering Castle,” he confirmed.

“She also trained at least two others. The ones to whom she gave the bracelets. But I get the idea that she was working up to doing something as a group—her and her two apprentices. Only, that one apprentice lost the stone out of her bracelet at the crime scene.”

“Then, this stone ties Kettering to the Venifucus ,” Lynn breathed.

“Thanks to you, Zeke, we not only know that he was the money behind at least one of the teams sent after your unit, but we now have our proof that he’s allied with Venifucus mages.

I mean, we suspected it, of course, but this is actual proof.

” She turned back to Rick. “We need to share this information with the Lords and with Kinkaid right away. Their Alpha needs to know. Kettering just went from nuisance to confirmed enemy of both your unit and of the Light. He and the mages who wear the bracelets have earned death sentences under shifter law for killing two of Kinkaid’s own. ”

“Really?” Rick asked before Zeke could.

“Shifter law is harsh, just, and fair, Granny always said,” Lynn replied.

“Come to think of it, she needs to know about the artisan mage too. It’s a very specialized sort of magic, and she might be able to tell us more about the maker of the bracelets.

In the meantime...” Lynn carefully scooped up the stone without touching it, sealing it in a cotton bag and then placing it in a little box that had what looked like magical symbols carved into the wood.

“We’ll just keep this evil thing under wraps in my protective box so none of its malice leaks out to affect us. ”

Zeke raised his brows at her words. He wasn’t completely comfortable with all the magic that they were learning about these days, but he supposed he’d have to change with the times if he wasn’t going to get left behind.

“If you ever need to store something magical, use only natural fibers. Cotton, wool, linen. And don’t handle it with metal of any kind.

Too conductive of magical power. A wooden stick will do.

Don’t use plastic either. Magic can’t be blocked by man-made materials, but nature provides, as my granny always says,” Lynn instructed those in the room.

The more Zeke learned about magic, the weirder everything felt to him.

He was way out of his element with everything that had happened to them since the desert, but he was going to have to figure it out.

This was his life now. His world had expanded to include magic and some really terrible bad guys who were worse even than the terrorists they'd been tasked to stop before.

"Got anything else for me to read?" Zeke asked, hoping the answer would be in the negative. He needed to get out of this room and get some fresh air.

First, though, he had to deliver the locket in his pocket to its rightful owner.

Seeing Celine would help settle his restless mind even better than being outdoors, he thought.

She had a calming effect on him that was hard to explain.

He just liked being in her presence. And if she realized she'd lost the locket, she'd be frantic.

He didn't want her to feel that way for one second longer than she had to.

"That's all for now," Rick said, already making notes in a paper file. "Dismissed."

They were doing everything by hand. No computers that could be hacked were allowed to record these sessions. They were going old school to keep all information about the unit as secure as possible.

Zeke got out of the rig they'd had on him with Lynn's help, then rose from his chair and saluted his superior officer before leaving the room.

They might all be friends, but they were still in the military, and with so much change in their lives, military formality during their working hours was important to keep the unit functioning.

It was all about respect, and Zeke knew that although Rick was an officer and Zeke was enlisted, the respect for each other went both ways.

They'd cemented those bonds in foreign hellholes all over the world.

Looking at his watch, Zeke realized he had about forty-five minutes until lunchtime.

He knew where to find Celine at this time of day.

She'd be in the big cafeteria kitchen, helping her grandfather prepare and serve the midday meal.

Mission in mind, he coasted down the stairs at almost double-time, eager to see her and get her property back to her as quickly as possible.

He entered the cafeteria through the public entrance off the main corridor on the ground floor of the building that had been given over to the unit.

The big room was empty, but he could see a few of the staff moving around through the little window in the swinging door that led to the kitchen.

He peered through the window first, to see if he'd been right about Celine being there.

Sure enough, she was chopping vegetables at a workstation along the far wall, near a window.

He'd never invaded the kitchen before, but this was important. He pushed open the swinging door, and the big old master chief looked up from where he'd been supervising one of his staff at a multi-burner stove. He frowned a bit and came over.

“Can I help you, soldier?” Master Chief Santini asked in his gruff voice.

Zeke could feel everyone in the kitchen watching him with varying looks of interest and speculation. Nobody was hostile, exactly, but they were surprised by his entry into what was rightfully their domain.

“Sorry to interrupt your work, Master Chief. I just need to talk to Celine for a quick moment, if she can be spared,” Zeke said politely.

He didn’t elaborate on why. The last thing he wanted was for the master chief to interfere with Zeke’s self-appointed mission.

He wanted to be the one to give the locket back to Celine.

He wanted a chance to talk to her. To tell her that he felt bad about what he’d seen, and that he would listen if she ever wanted to talk about her parents and the violent way they had left this world.

Zeke held his ground as the old master chief’s eyes narrowed on him. Zeke wondered if the master chief would demand to know why, but the older man just looked him up and down once, then again, then nodded.

“Celine,” he said, not taking his eyes off Zeke. “Visitor. You’ve got five minutes.”

Celine came over as everybody watched, then the master chief walked back to the stove, and Zeke tried to smile to put her at ease.

She frowned, and he was very conscious that everyone in the kitchen was still watching them intently and could probably hear every word that was spoken with their acute shifter hearing.

“Can we talk for a moment in the cafeteria?” Zeke suggested, wanting to get her away from those prying eyes and attentive ears.

Celine nodded and preceded him out the swinging door. She made for the far end of the cafeteria without prompting, then sat at a table against the wall. She smiled gently at him as he sat opposite her.

“What’s up?” she asked.

Celine wasn’t in the military but had been granted leave to work with her grandfather.

Zeke assumed, now that he knew more about her situation, that she had wanted to be near family while recovering from the loss of her parents.

As a civilian, she was a lot more casual in her words and clothing choices than almost everyone else who worked on the base.

Of course, there were also a few civilian spouses living on the island, both among the shifters and the unit.

Many of them worked in supporting roles, keeping track of paperwork in the various offices or doing other tasks around the base.

Celine fit into that category of civilian support staff, though she was single as far as Zeke knew.

Zeke reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out the locket. Her eyes widened, and her hand went to her chest where the locket usually rested.

“I believe you lost this earlier today,” he said, passing the locket across the small table to her. She took it gratefully.

“I didn’t even realize,” she said, her voice almost a whisper. “Where did you find it?”

“I didn’t find it. Rick did. He noticed it under his table after he finished eating, and since he planned to test my new abilities today, he thought it would make a good test object.” Zeke shrugged.

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Most of the shifters who worked in their building knew a bit about what he and the other men of his unit could do, but he'd never really talked about it openly with any of them.

He figured if he was going to get used to being a weirdo with a special power, he was going to have to talk to someone.

He was also going to have to get used to dealing with shapeshifters.

He preferred to talk to Celine, if he had a choice in the matter—and right now, he did.

He wasn't completely sure why, but she felt comfortable to him in a way nobody else that he'd met on the island did. He liked talking to her and being around her, though they hadn't really had as much interaction as he'd like. He wanted to remedy that. As long as she felt the same.

"Wait," she said, eyeing him carefully. "So how did you know it was mine?"

Zeke cleared his throat and chose his words. Now was the moment for truth. He wondered how she'd take it. Only one way to find out.

"My peculiar little talent is called psychometry," he told her and waited to see if she knew what that meant.

"You mean..." She paused, then seemed to regroup. "You mean you can see the history of an object just by touching it?"

Zeke nodded, glad he wouldn't have to explain it. Every time he tried to put his gift into words, he felt foolish. It still seemed so unreal, even though he'd been living with this new state of affairs for months now.

"You saw me lose the locket?" she asked when he remained silent.

He paused. She should know the extent of what he'd seen. She had a right to that information.

"And I know why you were looking at the photos today of all days," he added quietly.

He wanted so badly to reach out to her, but he wasn't sure about the protocol for touching a shifter.

He knew they shared hugs and touches easily among themselves, but they were standoffish with strangers.

Zeke didn't want to push her too far. "I'm sorry, Celine.

You have my sympathy. And if you ever need someone to talk to, I just want you to know...

I'll listen. I've lost friends and even a close family member to violence.

I can understand a bit of what you must be feeling. "

Her eyes widened, then filled with tears that she somehow refused to let fall. The wet shining of her eyes made him feel like he'd just kicked a puppy, but her words helped ease his discomfort.

“I appreciate that,” she said, and he could hear the honest emotion in her words.

“Gramps has been a big help, along with being here, away from where it happened.” She hiccupped a bit and paused to regain her composure.

“But it’s hard to talk about it with him or the others.

He’s so strong and resilient and perfect... and I’m still a mess.”

Zeke reached across the table, unable to stop himself, though he didn’t touch her. She didn’t move away, which he counted as a positive sign.

“You’re allowed to be a mess,” he said softly.

“Grief affects everyone a little differently. When my older brother was gunned down right in front of my eyes, I went off the rails for a while. I was angry at everyone and everything. I wanted to find the older kids in that gang and beat them to death with my bare hands, but the cops caught them first. Which turned out better for me in the long run, I know. But I was angry at the world for a long time, and joining the military was the only thing I could do to honor my brother’s memory that felt like I would actually accomplish something good in his name.

” He shrugged as if it didn’t matter, but he’d never really told anyone about his reasons for joining the Army before.

Not like this. Not the whole truth. “So, I beat up terrorists and people who want to kill innocents for a living, sanctioned by Uncle Sam. I used all that anger to do something good. But I still miss my brother. I’ll never stop missing him.

Just like you’ll probably never stop missing your folks. ”

She surprised him by covering his hand that was still stretched out on the table with hers. She squeezed it gently.

“Thank you,” she said with quiet dignity. “I think you do understand.”

She sniffed just once and then removed her hand, but she didn’t leave. Zeke waited patiently to see what she’d say.

“I want to hunt down the bitch who killed my parents and rip her to shreds,” she admitted.

“But I’m a selkie. A few of my ancestors had lion spirits, and I think that’s where my bloodthirstiness comes from...

” She shook her head and smiled a little at her own words.

“But I’m not really good at hunting on land.

And I don’t know where to start to find the mage that killed my mother and father. ”

“Wait a minute,” Zeke said, as something began to click into place in his mind. He didn’t know why he hadn’t made the connection before. “You’re sure the killer was female? And how do you know she was a mage?”

Celine nodded. “There was a witness who saw a female shape enter the house, though it was dark, and they didn’t get a good look at her. And for a single person to subdue and kill two shifters in such a way, they had to have dark magic on their side. They also found some evidence at the scene—”

“A carved stone?” he asked, cutting off her words with an eager feeling in his gut.

“Yes. How did you know?” She looked at him oddly, but he just nodded.

“Because I read that stone a few minutes ago for my last feat of psychometry for the morning. I saw the scene and how the stone was lost. I was also able to identify where the mage was, along with some other details. I didn’t realize the stone was associated with your parents, though.

I told Rick and the gang everything I saw.

Lynn was going to contact her grandmother to see if she could get more information on the mages, and Rick is reporting the location I saw to our chain of command.

I’m sure Commander Kinkaid is in the loop. ”

“But that’s great,” Celine said, sounding hopeful. “This could be the break we need.”

He wasn’t sure how much to tell her. She deserved the truth, but there were protocols that had been put in place since the unit had acquired their new abilities.

He’d have to check with his commanding officer first, before he divulged any more.

He’d probably already said too much, but that would likely be forgiven since he hadn’t realized the two readings were connected at first.

“Let me talk to Captain Haliwell, and then, maybe I can tell you more about what I saw after lunch?” Zeke suggested.

He saw her look over his shoulder, and he turned to catch a glimpse of the master chief watching them through the window on the swinging door. She jumped up from her seat, and he rose as well.

“I’m going to explain a bit of this to Gramps.

If you’ve cracked the case, he’ll be notified.

He has a personal interest, after all, and was promised a place in the hunt by the Kinkaid Alpha,” she told him.

Zeke was learning a bit more each day about how the shifters did things, though he still wasn’t sure about all the lingo.

“I can’t thank you enough, Zeke,” she said, surprising him with a quick hug and kiss on his cheek that nearly took his breath away.

He couldn’t help but notice how nicely she fit against him.

And the clean, fresh scent of her long blonde hair made him want to breathe in and imprint that delectable scent on his memory.

She moved away all too soon, heading back toward the kitchen, putting the locket back around her neck as she went.

At the swinging door, she paused and turned back to look at him. She waved and then went back into the kitchen, a smile on her face for the first time since they’d met.

He’d done that. He’d put a smile on her face. Finally. It might not be due to humor or enjoyment, but it was a smile, nonetheless. He counted that as a win.

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Celine's head was reeling as she went back into the kitchen. The handsome soldier had just blown her mind. Today of all days. The anniversary of her parents' deaths. He'd at last given her some hope that there might be a chance to catch the killer.

A year had passed without any further information.

Celine had almost given up hope. She'd come here to be with her grandfather, in despair.

Nobody knew if her life was also in danger, and after a few incidents that could have been attempts on her life that didn't succeed, everybody had agreed to err on the side of caution and send her to Gramps.

It was somewhat irregular to have a civilian on this Top-Secret shifter military base, but things on the island had changed a lot, apparently, since the gifted humans had been stationed here.

They had brought their wives and a few, select, civilian researchers to the island, which was why Gramps had taken the assignment to head up their kitchen. To keep an eye on them all.

It was a good place for Celine too, since there were other women who weren't soldiers around.

Even if they were human and not all that familiar with shifter culture.

They were learning, and friendships were starting to form.

Celine genuinely liked the ladies that were affiliated with the Green Beret unit.

The men were nice too, though she didn't interact with them a lot.

Except for Zeke. He'd made a point to talk to her a few times, and she had sensed his interest. She was interested in him too, if she was being honest with herself.

He'd been the one bright spot in an otherwise grief-filled existence for her.

She knew she should be shaking off the sorrow faster, but the fact that the killer hadn't been found gnawed at her.

It wouldn't let her rest. She wasn't a soldier or a mighty hunter like some of the others in her family, but she had their genes and sensibilities.

She wanted that evil witch caught and punished.

Eliminated permanently. By her hand, if at all possible.

Her inner beast was just bloodthirsty enough to want to kill the evil being that had taken the two most important people out of her life in such a heinous way.

But Celine had been built for protection, not retribution.

Her magical powers, such as they were, didn't really lend themselves to the revenge she wished for in her heart.

And now, Zeke and his extraordinary gift had given her hope for the first time in the year since her parents died. Hope that they might actually be able to track down the killer.

Celine was a big believer in fate, and the fact that he'd ended up in possession of her locket on the same day that someone had asked him to read that damned stone couldn't be just a coincidence.

She hardly ever took off the locket and was shocked that she hadn't noticed it was gone until he'd handed it back to her.

She wasn't that forgetful or unobservant normally.

Today was a rough day, of course, but she was still astounded that she hadn't noticed the familiar weight of the locket wasn't around her neck.

And then for Zeke to get it, along with the one confounding piece of evidence from her parents' brutal attack.

That was just too good. Too perfect. Too much as if the hand of the Goddess was orchestrating events.

Celine sent a quick prayer of thanks to the Mother of All as she reentered the kitchen. Everybody was watching her, and she knew she had to say something. She went straight over to her grandfather.

"I lost my locket, and Zeke was returning it," she told him, knowing everybody else could hear her, since they were all shifters. "And there's a break in the case," she added as her grandfather's eyes narrowed. "I think it's going to be big."

Nodding, her grandfather wiped his hands on the kitchen towel he kept over his shoulder and tossed it aside.

He spared one moment to hug her close, and she reveled in the feel of his big, strong arms around her.

He was precious to her and had stepped in to comfort her, even as he was hurting from the loss of his son and daughter-in-law.

They had comforted each other in those early days when she had first arrived on the island.

As much as the brawny master chief would allow anyone to comfort him.

Still, he was a shifter, and big hugs were his specialty.

“Wait here, pumpkin,” he told her. “I’ll find out what’s going on.” He looked up at his second and nodded. “Take over. I may not be back for a while.”

“Yes, Chief,” the second responded immediately.

The rest of the kitchen went back to work, and Celine busied herself finishing up with the vegetables she’d been chopping.

Busy work helped settle her mind a bit. If there was more to find out—and she had to believe there was—her grandfather would get to the bottom of it.

Because of the military setting, he had to be the one to approach the hierarchy.

She couldn’t just go to the Alpha here, though he was a distant relation as they were both members of the Kinkaid Clan.

There was an order to things here on the island that didn’t usually exist outside the military.

There was shifter hierarchy and military hierarchy, and her grandfather knew how to navigate both.

She trusted him to know the best approach.

That thought made her pause. She realized she also trusted the human soldier who had become so intriguing to her in such a short time.

The first time she'd seen Zeke, her inner seal had stood up and taken notice—something it had never really done before.

Not in that way. It thought Zeke might be an ideal playmate, which seemed odd, since he wasn't a shifter, and she didn't know what sort of skills he had in the water.

He was a Green Beret, which meant he had special training in all sorts of environments, but he wasn't a Navy SEAL.

The SEALs excelled in water whether they were shifters or regular humans.

She wasn't sure what the Army Special Forces were taught or what sorts of skills they had.

It was probably similar, but she'd have to observe some of them in the water to find out for sure.

She certainly wanted to observe the handsome sergeant in the water. In his bathing suit. Or out of it. The scandalous thought almost made her smile.

Celine did her best to remain calm through the rest of the meal service.

The Green Beret unit wasn't super demanding, and they usually all ate at the same time, except for those on duty.

The kitchen staff always prepared a few meals to leave in the fridge for those who

might be working odd shifts and need something to eat later, since the kitchen wasn't staffed around the clock.

The second in command took over seamlessly from her grandfather, and everyone obeyed her with military precision.

Except Celine, of course. She wasn't military, but she tried her best to fit in with the rest of the crew.

They were all shifters. A mixed bunch of lions, a selkie or two, a werewolf and a lynx rotated through the kitchen staff, but always under the direction of her grandfather or his second, Kathleen Kinkaid, a strong, maternal lioness who was protective of everyone in her care.

She was tall and lithe, like most lionesses, and had a very strong personality.

Only Celine's grandfather could temper Kathy's tendency to turn the crew into a pseudo-family that she would mother with an iron hand.

She had a very dominant personality, and she was a Kinkaid, but she had grown up with Celine's father and subdued her own dominant traits a little to follow the master chief's lead.

Kathy saw Celine's grandfather as a parental figure and gave him the respect due that position.

He was the true Alpha of this crew, and everybody knew it, though Kathy was a respectable stand-in, when needed.

"All through with the carrots?" Kathy asked in a soft tone as she sidled up beside Celine. Kathy could be compassionate when the situation called for it. She might be

dominant, but she was also maternal, which made for a tough-as-nails combination.

“Yes, ma’am,” Celine replied, putting the last of her chopped carrots into the container that would then be given to the chefs.

“Are you all right?” Kathy’s voice dropped even lower.

Celine looked up at the woman who had been like an aunt to her for as long as Celine had known her. Kathy had taken it hard when Celine’s parents—two of her oldest and dearest friends—had been murdered.

Celine nodded. “I’m okay. In fact, I feel like the investigation might finally have caught a break, though Zeke couldn’t tell me much.”

“The master chief will get everything there is to know,” Kathy said confidently.

“I know,” Celine said, smiling softly. They both knew her grandfather didn’t take no for an answer when it was about something important.

“Do you want to keep busy or would you like a few minutes to yourself?” Kathy asked, compassion in her tone when she talked to Celine.

“Busy,” Celine said firmly. “Please.”

Kathy nodded and took the container of chopped carrots. “Might as well get started on peeling potatoes, then.” She smiled kindly as she left with the carrots, and Celine turned to get the sack of potatoes out from under the worktable.

She was about halfway through the sack when her grandfather reappeared in the kitchen. He signaled to Kathy and had a brief conversation with her, then made a beeline for Celine.

“You and I are going to attend a briefing after lunch with the Army guys and some of the chain of command,” he told her flat out. Her heart leapt.

“They’re going to share what they know?” she asked, hope filling her.

Her grandfather nodded. “We’re all cooperating with each other these days, and these Army guys have proven themselves to be men of honor.

I’ve been watching them for Lester, and frankly, they’ve all impressed me, though I don’t have a good read on young Ezekiel.

He’s the one who apparently has the gift of psychometry. ”

“He can see the history of an object just by touching it. Gramps, they had him touch the stone earlier today.” She marveled again at the chain of events.

“I lost my locket in the dining room, and the doctor found it and had Zeke read it. He knew it was mine, but he also knew why I was looking at it and what had happened. Then, later, the doctor gave him the stone to read, and only when we were talking did he put the two together and realized it was evidence from my parents’ house. ”

“Yeah, Lester told me as much, but I still don’t really know much about Ezekiel. He’s a quiet one. What have you learned about him, since you two seem to be on a first-name basis?”

Was her grandfather frowning? Did he not approve? Celine felt a bit of stubbornness rise in her. She liked Zeke, and she would talk to him regardless of what anyone else thought. He might be human, but he was a good man. She knew that in her heart.

“We’ve talked a few times, but nothing major,” Celine replied casually. “Until this morning, that is. He was very kind about what he saw when he touched my locket. He

told me that he'd lost a brother to violence and was very compassionate about the whole thing without pushing me to share anything."

Unlike some people, she thought. Kathy had tried to get Celine to talk about the tragedy more than once, but Celine just couldn't. Not with Kathy. Not yet. Not ever, maybe.

Gramps just grunted a little and nodded again. He folded his muscular arms over his chest and leaned back against the worktable. He surveyed the kitchen and everything going on in it, then looked down at Celine, meeting her gaze.

"Just tread carefully, pumpkin. We may have been working around these guys for a while, and they seem all right, but I don't want you getting too involved with any of them. They've got a mighty high price on their heads," he warned as Celine bristled a bit, though she tried not to let it show.

"Zeke can help us," she reminded her grandfather. "And he's a nice guy. That's all."

For now, she amended silently. Thankfully, her grandfather couldn't read her mind, though she'd heard the others wondering if maybe one of the Green Berets might have that scary ability.

None of the shifters—at least those in the kitchen—seemed to know for sure.

Though, she'd bet Uncle Lester knew. Uncle Lester knew just about everything and was far, far up the hierarchy in both the military and the Clan.

"Finish up those potatoes and then grab some lunch. Be ready at fourteen hundred for the briefing. I'll pick you up here and escort you to the conference room."

Two o'clock, Celine thought as her grandfather walked away to check the progress on

the rest of the lunch they'd be serving shortly. Just about three hours from now she'd learn more about what Zeke had seen. She was both elated and scared.

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Zeke entered the conference room barely two minutes before the appointed time.

He'd gotten waylaid after lunch by his unit commander who wanted to have a word with him before the meeting.

Hal—Captain Haliwell—was the leader of the Green Beret unit and one of the best commanders Zeke had ever served under.

Hal cautioned Zeke to choose his words carefully during the briefing since they were still learning how shifters tended to react when hearing upsetting news.

And they were bound to be upset by what Zeke had to report.

After he'd talked with Celine that morning, he'd gone directly to Hal and explained the connection between the items he'd been asked to read during the morning experimental session.

Hal had listened carefully, and when the phone in his office rang a few minutes later, he'd adopted a resigned look.

Commander Lester Kinkaid, the base commander and their temporary C.O.

while they were on his base, was on the phone, demanding to know everything that Zeke had seen.

They'd set up a time to meet, and Hal had asked Zeke to give him the information first, as a sort of test run, so that Hal wouldn't be taken by surprise by anything that

might be revealed.

Zeke spent the next twenty minutes going over everything with Hal, and then again with Hal and Rick, once Rick had joined them in Hal's office with his handwritten notes from that morning's session.

They'd gone over it all again, and Hal had sent a few guys to the cafeteria to gather trays of lunch for them while they continued to prepare for the briefing in Hal's office.

They ate while they worked and ironed out a reasonable presentation for the Navy guys, which all three would give at the briefing.

Zeke was glad of the preparation time. He'd never done anything quite like this before, and it was new territory for him, though it reminded him a lot of graduate school and his thesis defense, in some ways.

Of course, this subject matter was a little more occult than his thesis had been.

He'd never had to explain a weird psychometric gift to a group of shapeshifters.

When he thought of it like that, it still blew his mind that he was living side-by-side with people who could turn into ferocious beasts in the blink of an eye.

He'd never known such things existed before Babylon. He'd never even considered magic might be real. Sure, he'd seen some strange things in his time, but never anything that had categorically convinced him that magic was abundant in the world and making a home right next door.

He and his entire unit had their eyes wide open now that they were sharing this island with all sorts of military shapeshifters.

He hadn't seen anybody shift in front of him just yet, but he kept hoping to catch somebody doing it.

He was fascinated by the concept. And, he realized, Celine was one of them.

She'd told him she was a selkie this morning.

He'd been taught it was rude to ask a shifter what their animal form was outright, so he hadn't asked, but she'd volunteered the information, which had to mean she trusted him a bit, at least. She was so graceful, and she had those big eyes that made him think of a cute seal.

She must be hell-on-wheels in the water. Seals were great swimmers.

He thought he might like to swim with her someday. If fate allowed.

Almost shaking his head at the odd thought, Zeke took his seat next to Rick at the conference table, taking a moment to look around and nod polite greetings to everyone present.

He spared a soft smile for Celine, who sat next to Master Chief Santini, her grandfather, who looked grim.

An imposing man, Zeke tried not to let the master chief's expression intimidate him.

That old man had resting war face, Zeke knew from seeing him running the kitchen for the past few months.

Commander Kinkaid arrived with his son, Liam, in tow, and once they sat down, the meeting got started.

Hal kicked it off, as they had planned, with some background, then passed the proverbial baton to Rick, to explain what they already knew about Zeke's gift and what they'd been doing that morning to learn more.

Rick explained about finding the locket and how he'd thrown it in with the other items he'd collected to test Zeke, including the stone he'd been given by Lester Kinkaid for further study.

Then, all eyes turned to Zeke as Rick asked him to explain what he'd seen.

Zeke mentioned the locket and how he'd seen it was Celine's. He didn't go into detail about her feelings today. That was private. But he did need to mention knowing that her parents had died violently to connect to the later reading.

Zeke went through his reading of the stone step by step, as he'd practiced with Hal and Rick. He tried not to look at Celine. He didn't want to alert the very observant chain of command, as well as her grandfather, to his very real and intense interest in her. That was private too.

Commander Kinkaid started asking questions once Zeke was finished with his planned remarks. Zeke answered each question to the best of his ability. Then, the master chief began to grill him, but Zeke had told them all he could about the killer.

"There is one other thing I'd like to try," Zeke said when there was a pause.

"I didn't realize the stone was connected to Celine's parents when I first read it this morning.

I'd like to try again and do a deeper dive, if that's possible.

I might be able to see something new if I hold it in my hand rather than just touching

it with the tip of my finger,” he volunteered.

Rick frowned. Zeke knew the doctor had brought the stone along, just in case, but he'd counselled Zeke to go easy with the exploration of his talent after a few incidents early on.

Zeke had learned not to touch things fully unless he wanted to get blasted and overwhelmed with imagery that he hadn't been equipped to interpret in the beginning.

But for Celine, Zeke would risk it. She needed answers, and he might be able to give her some.

It was his only gift, and not something that had been super useful to this point. He wanted to take a chance and lay it all on the line for Celine. He'd do anything for her.

Whoa . That was a sort of intense thought. He liked her. A lot. He was attracted to her. But willing to do anything for her? Anything? Really?

He considered that thought for a split second while Rick deliberated with the others about allowing Zeke a second shot at the stone.

Finally, Zeke shrugged inwardly and realized it was nothing less than the truth.

He was attached to her already. Something he never would have expected.

But especially after seeing and feeling Celine's grief today, he wanted to bring her some closure and resolution. To bring that about, he'd do anything .

“All right,” Rick finally relented, pulling the plastic bag containing the stone out of a manilla envelope he'd brought with him into the conference room.

“But I want Zeke to back off the moment he starts to feel the slightest bit overwhelmed. We don’t want a repeat of his first attempt to read an object with a violent past.”

“Why?” Liam asked, speaking for the first time. “What happened?”

“He passed out and sank into a coma for almost twenty-four hours. Even my abilities couldn’t reach him,” Rick reported grimly. “What he can do is valuable, but not if he burns himself out doing it.”

Rick slid the stone out of a cotton drawstring bag without touching the object, and Zeke reached for it, but Rick stopped him with a gesture. He used the eraser end of his pencil to push the stone directly in front of Zeke as everybody watched.

“Start slow,” Rick advised, and Zeke made himself listen. He reached out with one finger, as he had that morning and closed his eyes.

“It’s the same as I saw this morning,” Zeke reported, sorting through the images he received, looking for something new or helpful, but there was nothing.

He placed a second finger on the stone and felt the increase in energy.

“She is from the Caribbean,” he said. “The magic user who wore the bracelet that held this stone. She was thinking about visiting home on her way back from this errand.”

“Errand?” Lester asked from across the table.

Zeke opened his eyes momentarily. “The murders were a task set her by her mentor. She flew here to kill all three of them.” His eyes met Celine’s. “She meant to kill you too.”

“Why? Can you see that?” Master Chief Santini asked, his frown deepening.

“It’s not clear,” Zeke said, closing his eyes again, concentrating on the images and feelings.

“Something about a vision. If they’d lived, Celine’s parents would have been in a position to stop some bigger plan, I think.

It’s not really clear. Just a vague feeling from the mage as she thought about what she had planned. ”

“They have access to a foreseer,” Hal mused, making a note.

“Yes,” Zeke confirmed, adding another finger to the stone’s curved surface.

It was a cabochon with an arcane design carved into it on both sides.

So far, he’d only touched the domed outer surface.

He cautioned himself to go slow, but he was intrigued by the idea of flipping the thing over and touching the bottom of it too.

Somehow, he thought there might be more information on the reverse.

Adding a fourth finger, new information flooded him.

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“The third mage—not the teacher, but the second student. She has limited foresight. She makes big predictions, but doesn’t see much of immediate events.

She’s not like our friends. She just sees vague images of big picture stuff.

She said Celine’s family would be trouble if any of them lived.

The one that was sent here was supposed to kill them all cleanly and leave no trace. ”

“She failed on both counts,” Liam murmured with some satisfaction in his tone.

“And she stirred the hornet’s nest. She attacked not just Celine’s family unit, but our Clan. Kinkaid will not stand still for that,” Master Chief Santini added, his tone gruff but firm.

“And so, the prophecy comes to pass,” Lester intoned.

“By messing up and leaving evidence behind, and a survivor, she has earned the wrath of our entire Clan. She killed two of our own. We will not let that pass without comment.” Lester’s tone was more promise than speculation.

It was also ice cold and deadly, which Zeke respected.

Taking a deep breath, Zeke added his thumb and gripped the edges of the stone, flipping it onto its back quickly.

It wobbled a bit, its domed surface rolling a little on the smooth table.

He moved his hand away to take a look at the inscription.

It looked sort of evil, though he was no expert in such things.

“Maybe we should have Lynn take another look at that,” Rick said at Zeke’s side as they both looked at the bottom of the stone.

“Do you see that?” Zeke asked, needing to double check his own vision.

“If you mean the swirling red glow in the carved lines, then yes,” Hal said as all three of the Green Berets sat back to just look at the thing for a moment.

“Did it do this before?” Hal asked Rick.

“Not that anybody saw. It certainly didn’t glow when Lynn looked at it, though she didn’t touch it.

Nobody has, actually, except Zeke. Lynn was clear about not touching possibly magical objects.

We’re being ultra cautious and only examining things like this—not that we have all that many—under controlled laboratory conditions.

This morning was the first time we’d taken it out of its protective wrapping since Lynn first looked at it. ”

“But I wasn’t in the laboratory,” Zeke said, looking over at Rick quizzically.

“We thought the office setting would make you more comfortable than the lab,” the doctor replied offhandedly.

Zeke nodded and turned back to the object. He reached out his hand, but Hal pulled it back with a quick gesture.

“I’m not sure you should be touching that thing while it’s glowing like that,” Hal said cautiously.

“We need to know more. I need to see whatever this thing can show me. It’s the only clue we have,” Zeke said. It was important that he do everything he could to help Celine. No matter the risk to himself.

Hal looked over at the Navy contingent on the other side of the table, who were all watching this attentively. Then, Hal sighed.

“You guys know more about this sort of stuff than we do,” Hal admitted. “What do you think?”

“It’s risky,” Lester said honestly.

“But it might be worth it,” Santini added, rubbing his chin with one hand. “If young Zeke is willing to take the risk.”

“Magic affects different people in different ways,” Liam said sensibly, leaning forward.

“There’s a chance it won’t have any effect on you, though that’s admittedly, the best-case scenario.

It could knock you into next week, or even kill you, though I suspect that’s unlikely for such a small and recently created artifact.

You saw it being made, right, Zeke? Do you have any idea when that was? ”

“Winter in Germany,” Zeke replied at once. “Probably within the last year or two judging by the skyline I saw. I know the area. I know what buildings have gone up, and how the silhouette has changed over the past few years.”

“It often takes time for a magical object to accrue the kind of malevolence or power needed to kill,” Lester mused.

“Though, it could still be quite potent, depending on the abilities of the mage who forged it. You should be cautious, and frankly, I can’t order you to take such a risk.

It has to be your decision.” Lester met Zeke’s eyes, and he saw the challenge there.

Well. Challenge accepted. What did the man think he was?

Some sort of coward? And then, Zeke looked at Celine’s pinched expression.

She was worried for him, which touched him deeply.

He didn’t want to fall flat on his face, metaphorically speaking, in front of her, but if he could get more information out of the stone that would help her, he’d do anything.

There was that word again. Anything she wanted, he would do his best to give her.

Very deliberately, Zeke reached out with one finger and gently touched the flat side of the stone as lightly as possible. It wobbled a bit, but the burst of imagery and emotion that hit him made him gasp. Still, he held on, riding the wave and picking apart the vision.

“More chanting as the runes were carved.” Runes?

Where had he gotten that word from? Maybe the vision was telling him more than he

realized.

“Similar words to the ones Lynn recorded this morning. The woman paused to admire her work. Someone came into the room as she was holding this stone in her hand. The room is dark. It’s night.

She’s working by a fire with a bright task light illuminating just the workspace where she’s making the three bracelets.

” He made note of everything he could see in the odd light.

“The person asked her for an update on her progress. She said all four settings were coming along and that his would be ready first.”

“Four stones?” Rick asked, clearly surprised. “You only saw three earlier.”

“Three in bracelets,” Zeke clarified. “But there’s another.

A smaller stone. I see it in the light. It’s clear and fiery red.

Ruby, I think. Faceted on top, carved on bottom with the same kind of runes.

It’s for him. A stone of protection and amplification of whatever gift he has.

” Zeke struggled to see more about the man in the strange light of the vision.

Then, suddenly, the man shifted to stand by the fire, and Zeke recognized him. “It’s Kettering.”

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“Kettering is a mage?” Lester asked, sounding surprised. Zeke nodded, though he kept his eyes closed and his attention on the vision.

“I don’t know what kind of power he has, but the stone was made for him to help strengthen whatever it is,” Zeke confirmed.

“I didn’t see it before because in the other vision, either it wasn’t in the workshop yet or he already had the ruby as the woman was making the bracelets for herself and her students. ”

“Nothing in our intel has anything about Kettering being a mage,” Liam said softly. “This is significant new information.”

Zeke opened his eyes and regarded the Navy guys. They all looked a bit impressed, which made him feel good. Maybe his lame gift wasn’t so lame after all.

“You bet your ass it is.” Santini sounded approving. “What else you got, Zeke?”

Zeke knew he had a faint smile hovering around his lips, but he couldn’t help it.

He looked at Celine before closing his eyes again and took her lovely face into the vision that gripped him as he reached out with two fingers to the flat side of the stone.

It was a good thing too. Since the red fire in the stone leapt up to zap him with a mini lightning bolt that singed his skin.

To his credit, Zeke didn’t cry out. He’d trained such responses out of himself when

he'd first joined the Special Forces. Crying out or making any kind of sound when you got hurt could get you killed in the field.

As it was, he shook his hand a bit before Rick grabbed it and gave him a bit of that healing juju that was his specialty. It wasn't a bad burn, but his fingers still tingled from the almost electrical jolt that had sizzled up his arm.

"What was that?" Hal asked.

"Offensive magic," Santini said in disgust. "That thing has its own protections, and they don't play nice."

"It's okay. I saw something as it zapped me.

A name. Salazar. Armando Salazar. He was the one who taught the woman how to craft the stones and gave her the raw materials.

He's the real mastermind behind the stones and the one she answers to in their organization.

Venifucus , right? That's what it's called? " Zeke asked.

Lester nodded, even as he sighed in resignation. "Yes, that's what it's called. So, this is confirmation. Not just evil, but organized, ancient evil."

"Uh..." Zeke tilted his head to the side. "Is it possible this guy could be hundreds of years old?"

"Why do you ask that?" Liam asked.

"Because I saw him in different time periods and different modes of dress. Like a

kaleidoscope of images starting in modern times and going back to the days when horses were the only mode of transportation. Lots of him on horseback and in carriages going back to what I think are Roman times,” Zeke explained, hardly believing what he’d seen and what it might mean.

“Some mages do have extra longevity,” Lester said carefully.

“Not all of it is nefarious in nature, though a lot of it can be, from what I’ve heard.

Some have fey blood that gives them long life, though that is rare.

Some of the really bad ones steal power from others in order to prolong their own lives.

Some are bloodletters—what popular culture calls vampires, though they don’t often join groups and seem to prefer building their own lonely little empires.

” Lester eyed Zeke questioningly. “Did those images you saw have him in full sunlight, or were they only at night?”

“No, he was definitely in daylight,” Zeke replied.

“Then, probably not a bloodletter,” Liam reasoned. “It’s more likely that he’s feeding off others or has some fey blood.”

“Fey like in fairies? Mushroom circles and all that?” Hal asked.

“Fey like in the highly magical fey realm, which is reached only by portals between the worlds and only with great difficulty and a large expenditure of energy,” Lester replied.

“There is precedent. Most say the Destroyer is fey, or half-fey. I don’t know which, exactly, but she’s lived for centuries and appears immortal to us. ”

“Well, the guy I saw is on her side. And like her, he’s lived a very long time,” Zeke said.

“Could be you’ve seen the one who has kept the Venifucus order alive and well through all these years when we thought it was dead and gone. He might be their leader in Elspeth’s absence—or, at the very least, high up in the organization. Good work, Sergeant,” Lester said, his tone approving.

“You won’t get anything else out of that stone anytime soon,” Santini said, leaning back in his chair. “Once tripped, magical safeguards like that take time to reset, and nobody will be able to touch it without harm until it does.”

The master chief sounded like he was speaking from experience, and Zeke believed him.

That zap had been painful, and he’d gotten the distinct impression that some sort of wall had been put up between him and the object’s history.

He nodded at the master chief and removed his hands from the table, leaving the stone untouched.

“I hate to say it, but I think you’re right, Master Chief. I’ve done all I can for now with this thing. Do you have any other objects I could read?” Zeke asked, hoping he could still help in some way.

Santini looked at Celine and then back at Zeke. “Well, there’s the house,” he offered tentatively.

“House?” Zeke repeated.

“My house,” Celine clarified, her voice sounding a bit rusty. “Where they were killed. It’s not far as the crow flies, and it’s been empty ever since...” She trailed off. Ever since the murders, she would have said, he knew.

“Where is it, exactly?” Hal asked, looking interested.

“Connecticut,” Santini answered. “We could take a boat over. It’s not far from the shore. We like to live places with water access, you know. It makes our other half feel more comfortable.”

“The unit isn’t supposed to leave this island,” Lester reminded them all, then seemed to relent. “But in this case, I think we can make an exception for a couple of hours. If you want to do it, Sergeant. I can’t order you to do this. It has to be strictly voluntary.”

“Anything,” Zeke said immediately, that word still ringing through his mind when it came to helping Celine. He clarified his meaning for the Navy folk. “I’m happy to help, sir.”

“I’ll authorize it,” Lester said, then eyed Hal. “If you’ll designate the mission parameters, I’ll arrange for a shifter escort, since we know the neighborhood and have a bit more experience with magic.”

“A joint operation?” Hal mused, then nodded. “Sounds good, sir. I’ll work out the details and liaise with...who?”

“Liam,” Lester said immediately. “He’ll be running the shifter contingent.”

“And I’d like to be on the mission, Alpha,” Santini said to Lester, who nodded.

“And me,” Celine said quietly. “I want to be there.”

“Are you sure?” Santini turned to his granddaughter and gave her a gentle look. “You don’t have to go back there if you don’t want to. I can handle it for you.”

“No, I want to go,” she said in a stronger voice. Then, her gaze met Zeke’s, and he saw resolution on her face. This was something she wanted to face head-on. He could respect that.

After a tense moment, Santini nodded, then turned to Lester, giving him a significant look that wasn’t too hard to decipher.

They were concerned about Celine returning to the scene of her parents’ murders, but her grandfather was willing to let her make her own decisions.

Zeke liked that, though he was also concerned about Celine’s reaction to revisiting the scene of the crime.

He was glad the master chief would be there, though Zeke worried that such an intense scene might overwhelm his new senses.

He’d have to try extra hard to keep it together so he could support Celine if she needed it and still perform his task of finding more clues that might help catch the perpetrator.

It was going to be tricky. He’d never done anything like this before, but he was willing to put himself and his new skill on the line to help her in any way he could.

The meeting wrapped up quickly after that, with the officers handing out tasks.

Zeke’s only mission was to rest up , in the words of his commanding officer, so he’d

be ready when the time came for action.

Everybody else would be planning the details of the mission.

Zeke's only role was to prepare himself.

He tried not to let that bother him and reminded himself that he'd be doing his part when they actually got to the house.

It didn't sit well with him, letting others do the heavy lifting of preparing for the mission, but times had changed for all of them, and he had to adjust.

Santini took Celine out of the room with him, and there wasn't an opportunity to talk to her until much later that night. Zeke ate dinner quickly, intending to try to catch Celine before she got off work for the night.

At dinner, Zeke sat next to Mandy and Wil, hoping to ask the former Seattle detective a bit more about how to investigate a crime scene. He'd already had a quick conversation with her about the investigation, in general, but now that he would have access to the crime scene, he had more questions.

Mandy surprised him by saying that she was going to be working the case from her office on base.

She'd been given the task of liaising with the police in Connecticut and they'd already promised to send her the files on the murder.

Apparently, Commander Kinkaid had already sought her out to ask for her assistance, with full support from Hal.

Zeke was gratified to know that those in his unit and adjacent were taking this so

seriously, and all possible avenues were being investigated.

Mandy told him a bit of what she would look for when visiting a crime scene in general terms and the dinner conversation, while not exactly typical, was very educational.

At least now, Zeke had a plan of action in mind for when he got to the site tomorrow.

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“I wanted to go with you when I heard you were going to the scene,” Mandy said as their conversation was winding down and their dinners were almost gone.

“But I think I’m better off working the report angle since it’s been over a year and any visible evidence has long since been cleaned away.

You’re probably the only person I know who has a shot at finding out something new from the scene, and you can be sure I’ll want to know all about it when you get back.”

“No problem, Mandy,” Zeke replied, feeling comfortable now that Mandy was officially on the case for their unit. He was pretty sure she’d be at the debrief after his site visit tomorrow. He’d be interested to hear what she could glean from the police reports, as well.

The conversation turned a bit more general after that, with Wil describing a training program his father was working up for the shifters on the island who wanted a bit more sharpshooter training.

Zeke was glad to hear how well Wil’s dad was acclimating to the new situation and being healthy again.

He’d been so close to death only a short while ago, but Wil had taken Rick out to see him at his mountaintop home in Montana and he’d been healed.

Unable to hide the miracle, William Owens, Senior, had agreed to come back to the base with his son and take up an advisory position.

Senior was a legend in Special Forces circles and though he might be merely human and an older fellow, he still had mad skills with a sniper rifle and everybody wanted to learn from him.

Zeke was happy things had worked out so well for the old man and for Wil, because he'd brought Mandy back with him on that same mission and they had fallen in love.

There was a lot of that going around. Five of his comrades had found their mates since they'd returned to the States and all of those women were now living on base with them.

New futures were being forged and those men were happier than Zeke had ever seen them.

They also gave the rest of the guys hope, which was great for morale considering their odd situation.

Zeke hoped he might have some kind of future with Celine, but he had to help her find justice for her parents first. He wanted her happy, even if she didn't want to be with him.

At the very least, he wanted her friendship, and he'd do his best to help her in any way he could.

That thought firmly in mind, he went looking for her after rising from the table and parting from his friends.

As luck would have it, he didn't have to search far for Celine as he brought his tray of empty dishes back to the cafeteria's service area. She was sitting nearby with some of the other staff members and got up to intercept him when he drew near.

“I just wanted to thank you again,” she said, hesitantly, her smile a bit shy. “For what you did today,” she added.

Zeke found her enchanting in every way, though he was a bit uncomfortable with her gratitude.

He hadn’t really done anything yet. Nothing that he’d trained for, at least. The action—if you could call it that—so far, had been completely tame, and based on his newly acquired gift of psychometry.

That wasn’t something he’d trained for, or anything he’d ever expected to be doing with his life.

As far as he was concerned, it was a small, somewhat inconvenient bonus skill that hadn’t really proved itself as useful as the new abilities some of the other guys now had.

“I was happy to be of assistance,” he said quietly. “Are you busy right now? I’m off duty, and I’d like to talk privately, if you have a few minutes.”

He really wanted to talk to her. To be certain she really wanted to go back to her house. The scene of the crime. He knew that was going to be traumatic, and he wanted to assure her that he could do his thing without her presence.

Sure, he wanted to spend more time with her, but not if it meant her having to revisit the scene of her parents’ murders. That might be going a bit too far. He could do his magic thing and report back, and he wanted to be sure she knew she could trust him to leave no stone unturned.

“Yeah, I’m done for the night. Gramps gave me the night off clean-up duty.” She sent Zeke a small smile that lifted just the corner of her pretty lips.

He'd had dreams about those plump, pink lips and what they could do to his body, but he knew he was jumping the gun. She'd barely had a chance to get to know him at all yet. He had to find a way to rectify that situation as soon as possible.

"Do you want to take a walk along the beach?" he asked, hopeful that she wouldn't be scared off by the setting he'd suggested.

He rushed to clarify. "I know your people have heightened senses and can hear a lot better than regular folk. I also know that surveillance around this building is pretty tight. If we want to talk privately, I figured the shore would be the best place."

She nodded, seeming to understand, though he thought he saw a slight hint of disappointment on her lovely face.

Nah. Couldn't be. He mentally shook away his fanciful thoughts.

She wasn't that into him. Not yet, at any rate.

But he was working on it. Despite the awful situation with her parents and the grief she was still very obviously feeling, he wanted to get to know her better—and for her to get to know him.

Given half a chance, he was pretty sure he could talk her into a date or two. Or three. Or more. Hell, maybe forever.

Zeke was feeling reckless when it came to her and thoughts of the future. Not that he had any sort of clairvoyance like his buddy Jeeves and his lady, but any time he let himself think of the future, he had a hard time imagining it without Celine in his life. That had to mean something, right?

Maybe all it meant was that he was well and truly obsessed with a

beautiful—probably unattainable—woman, and he should get his expectations under control before he broke his own heart.

Or not. Zeke was a guy who liked taking risks.

He never would have gone Special Forces if he wasn't a daredevil at heart.

Why should he be any different when it came to romance?

He'd go for the gold and see what happened. Hopefully—and he really wished this with all his heart—he'd wind up with the lovely Celine at his side, in his bed, and his heart...forevermore. And he'd be damned if that thought didn't scare him one little bit.

"I see your point," she replied to his suggestion, not realizing the inner revelations he'd been experiencing. She nodded gently. "I'd love a walk along the beach. It's one of my favorite places, you know. Where the water meets the land is sort of my happy place for both sides of my nature."

"Good to know," he replied, marveling at the easy way she spoke of her magic. The dual nature that loved both land and sea and was at home in both. "I've always loved the beach, myself. Shall we?"

He gestured toward the door and the setting sun that was visible outside.

They had an hour or so to enjoy the sunset and twilight before it got too dark to see where they were going.

Although, she was a shifter. She probably could see better in the dark than he could.

He'd have to find a way to learn more about her abilities without offending her,

though he was still learning the rules when it came to interacting with shifters.

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The water lapped at the shore as they walked along. Zeke was having a hard time reining himself in when all he really wanted to do was stop, pull Celine into his arms and hold her. Then, maybe kiss her. Then, if she was willing, he'd do a whole lot more.

But they were comparative strangers. Except he knew all this new, intimate stuff about her and her family.

He knew she'd been hurt deeply by the violence in her past and the loss of her parents.

He knew she was still hurting, though maybe she was starting to come back to herself a little.

How he wanted to help her with that. How he wanted to be the one to hold her when she cried, kiss the tears right off her lovely face and then make love to her so long and hard that she didn't remember any of the bad stuff.

He'd been attracted to her from the first. He'd imagined being with her, stroking her long hair and touching her skin.

He just knew it would be soft and supple.

He wanted to caress every inch of her body and hear the way she would moan in pleasure.

He wanted to hear her whisper his name in the dark.

Or maybe scream it as he made her come. Yeah, he wanted that. He wanted it all.

But it had to start somewhere. He decided it would start here and now.

On this beach. Though he had to be cool about how he handled this situation.

She was on edge. He could feel that as they walked along.

He slowed his pace as they got to an area on the beach between buildings that was a bit more private. She slowed down as well.

“I’m sorry this is dragging up all sorts of bad memories for you, Celine,” he said softly. He kept his hands in his pockets because the minute he freed them, they’d be all over Celine, and she wasn’t quite ready for that. Not just yet, anyway.

“It’s the anniversary,” she said slowly.

“That’s what brought back all the sorrow.

But the fact that you’re finding new leads is giving me hope for the first time in a long time.

We might actually catch who did it and get some justice for my parents.

” Her voice was low, but Zeke felt the power behind her words.

“I’m glad.” He stopped walking and turned toward her. She did the same as the evening breeze floated around them. “I don’t like how sad you were when you were looking at your locket.”

She met his gaze and sort of squinted at him as her lips curled upward just a tiny bit.

It was like she was trying to puzzle him out, and he didn't really mind. He'd tell her anything she wanted to know, up to and including how much he wanted her.

"You really feel the emotions connected with the objects you touch?" she asked, then seemed to backtrack. "Forgive me if that's rude. I'm just fascinated by your gift."

Fascinated, huh? That was kind of nice, he thought. Though he certainly didn't think his runty gift was fascinating. Not when compared to what some of the other guys could do.

"If it's strong emotion, it comes through loud and clear.

I have to confess, my heart broke a little for you, feeling how deeply you were hurt by the loss of your parents.

"He moved one step closer to her, and she didn't step back.

Good. "I've felt that kind of searing pain.

I know what it did to you. What it did to me years ago. I'm sorry, Celine."

He kept his words soft, and his hands came out of his pockets, reaching for her.

She didn't object when he touched her shoulders then gathered her gently into his embrace.

Just holding her, rocking her slowly as the waves touched the shore and the night sounds started around them.

It was the most peaceful and the most meaningful moment he'd ever shared with a woman.

When she turned her head to rest against his chest, he was a goner. They just stood there in the advancing darkness, holding each other for a long moment.

“You’re a good man, Zeke,” she said finally, drawing back a bit to gaze up into his eyes in the soft moonlight. “Thank you for helping me get justice for my folks.”

“I’d do anything for you, Celine,” he said before thinking better of it. He didn’t want to scare her off. Not when he finally had her in his arms. But she didn’t seem to find his words too intense.

Then, she moved closer, and he couldn’t hold back any longer. He leaned down and covered her lips with his. Their first kiss, and it was a doozy.

Celine knew he was going to kiss her, and she didn’t move away.

She wanted Zeke’s kiss. Had wanted it for a while now.

Since she’d first seen him, if she was being honest with herself.

There was just something about this brave, strong man that had attracted her from the moment she’d laid eyes on him.

He’d also made her inner seal stand up and take notice, which was rare. It had seen him as a potential playmate and friend from the beginning. It also liked the way he took charge of their kiss and drowned her human form in pleasure. Boy-o-boy, the man could kiss!

She moved closer to him until she was practically climbing his tall, muscular body.

His arms tightened around her and moved lower, grasping her ass.

Oh, she liked that. His hands were as big as the rest of him, and they were strong but gentle.

She liked the way he handled her. He was considerate, but commanding.

The kiss deepened, and her body was tingling in places she'd thought might never tingle again. It had been a long time since she'd felt desire for anyone, but Zeke made her feel alive again in a way she'd never expected.

She shifted her weight slightly, sliding her hands up his chest until they framed the sides of his face. The slight stubble along his jaw tickled her palms, grounding her in the moment. He kissed like he meant it. Like she mattered.

And that... That made her heart flutter a bit.

In a good way. Not just from the kiss itself, but from everything behind it.

She really didn't think Zeke was playing games with her.

There was no slick charm or false bravado here.

Just a man who held her like she was precious.

A man who'd risked everything to help her face the shadows of her past—and now, was holding her like she was part of his future.

His lips coaxed hers open, and when their tongues met, heat curled low in her belly.

Her fingers moved into his hair, pulling him just a little closer.

His groan rumbled against her lips and vibrated through his chest into hers, and sweet

Mother of All, it made her feel wild. Wanted. And desired.

She broke away on a sharp breath, only to press another kiss against the corner of his mouth. Then his jaw. Then his neck.

“Celine...” His voice was low, a little hoarse, almost reverent.

She smiled against his skin, feeling bold, beautiful, and completely herself in a way she hadn't in years.

“Don't stop,” she whispered, her lips brushing his collarbone.

He pulled her in tighter, lifting her slightly as he turned them in a slow circle on the sand.

Her body pressed to his. His strength supporting her completely.

She really liked that. He wasn't some weak human man.

She thought he could give any one of her shifter brethren a run for his money, which made her inner seal want to cuddle into him and never let him go.

Whoa . Those were serious thoughts and feelings. All from just their first kiss? She had to think about this a little more thoroughly, but not right now. No. Right now was for feeling. Not necessarily thinking as he whirled her around briefly, making her feel downright giddy.

When he put her down again and her feet touched the sand, she tilted her head to look up at him, her breath catching at the expression on his face. If she wasn't much mistaken, it was something akin to awe.

Zeke looked at her like she was something more than she'd ever believed herself to be. The wind lifted her hair, and he brushed it gently back behind her ear, his touch tender.

“You’re pretty amazing, you know that?” he murmured. “Smart, strong, gorgeous...and I haven’t even scratched the surface yet.”

Warmth bloomed in her chest, soft and startling.

It would’ve been easy to dismiss it. Safer, maybe.

But Celine wasn’t a coward. She had faced a lot in her life, and this was, by far, one of the most pleasant—and slightly scary—experiences to date.

But it was scary in a good way. The best possible way. Maybe.

She leaned in, brushing another kiss to his lips, going a bit slower this time, making the kiss exploratory and so damned sweet. After a long moment, she pulled back, then rested her forehead against his chest, breathing him in, letting the moment settle around them like a big, warm, comfy blanket.

“You’re not so bad yourself, Sergeant,” she whispered, a small smile curving her lips.

Zeke chuckled, the sound wrapping her in warmth. She’d come to this island to hide, lick her wounds, and begin the search for justice.

She hadn’t expected to find a man who made her heart beat with excitement again. But maybe, just maybe...fate had given her more than she’d hoped for.

They stayed there in each other’s arms for a little while longer, swaying slightly in time with the breeze and the gently lapping waves. Neither of them spoke. They

didn't have to. Eventually, it was Celine who drew a slow breath and tilted her head to glance down the beach.

"We should head back," she said, her voice soft and a little reluctant.

Zeke nodded, but he didn't let go of her hand.

She didn't pull away either. They walked in silence, side by side, the rhythm of the surf a quiet companion to the rush of unspoken thoughts between them.

Her fingers curled around his, and every brush of skin made her acutely aware of how big he was—how warm, and how steady.

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She was in trouble. The good kind, maybe. But trouble all the same. She was way too attracted to him for her own good, but she couldn't really help herself. He was a hell of a guy, and she found it nearly impossible to resist him. Especially now, when she knew for a fact that he kissed like a god.

When the barracks building came into view, she caught the glint of eyes in the darkness.

One of the shifter soldiers on patrol made his presence known on the path that passed nearby, not even trying to hide his curiosity.

Another shifter, one of her lion relatives, stepped out from behind a parked vehicle as they approached the front steps of the barracks building, then did a double take before pretending to look at the sky.

Celine tensed and gave Zeke's hand a gentle squeeze before pulling free. He glanced over in surprise, clearly not sure why she was pulling away, until she shifted her gaze briefly toward the observers.

Zeke looked around with subtle nonchalance, and understanding dawned briefly in his eyes.

"Right," he said under his breath. "We are not alone. Sorry. We can keep things low key."

She offered him a small, apologetic smile. "That might be best. For now, at least. I don't really want to share this with anybody just yet. I hope you don't mind."

He gave a low chuckle, not quite amused, but not angry either. “Honestly, I wasn’t thinking that far ahead. But I get it. Mum’s the word until you say otherwise.”

“I appreciate that.”

She looked away, unable to handle the intensity of his gaze when they were in public.

No matter how much she wanted to keep her nosy relatives and the other shifters on this island out of her love life, it would be blazingly obvious if she couldn’t learn how to control her reactions to him better. She had to work on that.

“I should head back to my room,” she said gently.

“I’ll walk you—”

She raised her brows in mock warning, and he caught himself with a rueful grin.

“Right. Low key. I don’t like it, but I’ll do it. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“You bet.”

She gave him one last smile, then turned and walked farther along the path, her long strides confident, even if she wasn’t feeling it. She wanted to go back to him and kiss him some more, but she couldn’t. Steeling herself, she did her best to not look back.

Zeke watched her walk away until she vanished behind the curve of the path leading toward the other side of the island where she was quartered alongside the other female shifters on this base.

He didn’t move for a long moment. Just stood there, hands in his pockets, the warmth of her still lingering on his lips.

Damn .

He'd known there was something special about her the moment they met, but now he knew it for a fact.

He felt it down to the marrow of his bones.

The way she looked at him. The way she touched him.

The way she let herself be vulnerable in front of him while still displaying her core of inner strength attracted him in a way he was wholly unfamiliar with from his past relationships.

She was smart. Fierce. Brave. And heaven help him, she was sexy as hell. Not just in the obvious ways, but in how she moved, how she thought, how she felt in his arms. There was depth to her. An ocean's worth. He could drown in her and probably die happy.

And he wanted her. No question about that.

But he wanted more than just a warm body in his bed.

He wanted her . All of her. The way she'd looked at him tonight had nearly stolen his breath.

She looked at him like she could see him .

Not just the soldier or the weird psychometric guy, but him . Zeke.

She could be the real thing. That thought scared him a little.

He turned slowly, glancing up at the door to his barracks to find Rick there, watching him for a moment before heading back inside.

Zeke could tell immediately that Rick had noted the new dynamic between him and Celine.

And so, probably, had those shifters she'd pointed out earlier.

Word would spread. That wasn't ideal, but it wasn't the end of the world either.

For himself, he didn't care who knew he was attracted to Celine. If she'd let him, he'd stake a claim so nobody else would dare try to court her, but he had promised to try to control his caveman tendencies. She didn't want to go public just yet, and he had to respect that.

Zeke walked up the steps to the door of the building and paused on the threshold.

His room upstairs would be dark, quiet, and far too empty, and that hadn't really bothered him...

until he'd met Celine. Someday soon, he hoped, he'd have her more firmly in his life.

Tonight had been a start. Hopefully, in time, she would agree to be his, and where that would lead, he wasn't entirely certain, but when he thought about his future, he couldn't picture it without Celine by his side. It was the damndest thing.

He couldn't see the future like his friend and comrade Jeeves.

No, Zeke's specialty was the past. But maybe in this, he knew his own mind and his desire to have Celine in his life long-term.

If he thought it would do any good, he'd ask Jeeves what he knew of the future in that direction, but their resident clairvoyant had taken to playing his cards very close to his vest as he learned to deal with his new superpower.

With one last look in the direction Celine had gone, Zeke sighed and stepped inside, closing the door behind him. Tonight, his bed would be cold. But his heart was warm in a way it hadn't been in years. And that was a start.

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The next morning, Zeke was ready and waiting long before the rest of the small team that would be heading for the mainland was at the boat ramp.

He hadn't been able to sleep much, replaying the kiss he'd shared with Celine over and over in his mind as he stared up at the ceiling above his lonely bed.

She'd tasted wild and untamed, and he'd gotten what he thought might be a glimpse of her true nature in that moment of awakening passion.

A nature that had been subdued by grief this past year.

When he thought about what she'd been through, it broke his heart.

He knew that kind of pain. Watching someone you loved die and the aftermath of violence wasn't easy.

He knew that from first-hand experience.

But he didn't want to think about that either.

So, he'd gotten up well before dawn to get ready for the mission of the day.

They'd be leaving for the short hop across the water to the shoreline of Connecticut at dawn, so he only had an hour or two to kill before he was supposed to be at the dock.

He'd pulled night watch a lot since a few of his teammates had married.

The men who had women of their own usually liked to spend the night warm in bed with the ladies they loved, and Zeke couldn't really blame them.

As a result, he'd picked up more night watch shifts without complaint.

He liked prowling in the quiet hours when most of the rest of the base was asleep.

It appealed to his protective instincts to watch over his friends and colleagues while they were vulnerable in dreamland.

He did for them what he hadn't been able to do for his brother, who had been gunned down in the wee hours of the morning.

Danny hadn't been safe in his own bed, and Zeke had gone out looking for him.

His misguided brother had been out with his crew, and they'd already been jumped by a rival gang when Zeke arrived on the scene.

Things had escalated all too quickly, and when the dust settled, Danny was dead.

Zeke had held him as he'd died. He'd bled out before an ambulance could arrive.

Zeke had been too late to stop the violence or whisk his brother away.

He'd been too damned late to save the life of the brother he'd loved.

But he would do for his unit and their families what he hadn't been able to do for his own family. He'd keep them safe in the night as best he could. He'd stand watch so others could rest.

There was a round-the-clock coffee and snack station in the cafeteria for those who

pulled night duty. Zeke had grabbed one of the sandwiches always kept on hand in the small refrigerator, as well as a very large cup of coffee, then headed out for a stroll to calm his racing mind.

He knew his journey to the other side of the island where the boat ramp was located had been noted by the other soldiers who patrolled the night, but he hadn't seen anyone.

Since the shifters kept watch over the entire island and his unit was only responsible for watching their own building and perimeter, Zeke wasn't surprised by not seeing the other patrols.

The shifters, he had learned, were amazingly stealthy.

They wouldn't be seen unless they wanted to be seen. He could respect that.

Sitting on a bench near the boat ramp in the dim light of the moon, Zeke ate the sandwich and sipped his coffee, doing his best to quiet his mind.

He had work to do once the sun was up, and he wanted to be in the right frame of mind to focus on his task.

It was important to Celine, and therefore, it was important to him.

He had to do his best for her. Anything less was unacceptable.

The water was restless, just like he was.

There was a storm out at sea, but the weather here was decent enough.

He found the sounds of the waves lapping at the shoreline a few feet away

comforting.

Calming. Just what he needed. Once he finished eating, he just sat, contemplating the quiet right before dawn as his mind stilled and relief came over him.

He might not have had enough hours of sleep, but his mind was in the right place to accomplish his task.

That's what mattered. He would catch up on sleep later. He was good at taking combat naps.

"You're here early," came a gruff voice from Zeke's left.

He'd been somewhat aware of movement to his side, but it hadn't felt threatening, so Zeke hadn't reacted.

He'd assumed it was one of the shifters on patrol, and Zeke hadn't wanted to draw unnecessary attention.

But as he turned, he recognized the voice.

Zeke was unsurprised to find Master Chief Santini regarding him with narrowed eyes.

"Good morning, Master Chief." Neither of them were on duty, and they weren't even in the same branch of the military, but Zeke was careful to show respect for the older man by using his rank to address him.

Santini looked up at the moon, then glanced toward the east where the sun would be rising in a few minutes. He shook his head.

"It's not really morning yet, son," the old master chief observed, moving to sit at the

other end of the bench from Zeke. “Have you slept at all?”

“A bit.” Zeke shrugged. “I usually pull night watch, so I’m used to being up in the dark. I enjoy the quiet.”

The older man nodded. They sat silently for a moment before the master chief spoke again.

“I’m glad we have a chance to speak privately,” he said, turning a bit to face Zeke.

“I’d appreciate it if you would go easy on my granddaughter if you see anything really heinous at the house.

Save the really brutal stuff to report in private, without Celine listening.

She saw enough when she found her parents, and I don’t like the fact that she might be reliving it all by going back to the house with us.

I can’t make her stay away, but I also want to protect her as much as I can. ”

“I understand, sir,” Zeke said quietly, nodding.

He used the word “sir” not in the military sense, but in the manner of a young man speaking to the grandfather of a girl he liked. Master Chief Santini had a way of making Zeke feel like a teenager again, though he was chagrined to admit it, even to himself.

“I don’t claim to understand how your gift works, but I’ll be glad if you can give us any more to go on.

The search for my son and daughter-in-law’s killer has been at a standstill for

months, and you've already given us good, solid information we can build on to refresh the trail. Thanks for that, Zeke."

"You're welcome. I'm glad I could help, even in this small way," Zeke said, a little floored by the genuine gratitude he heard in the master chief's voice.

"Small? You think what you did was small? Hell, son," Santini regarded him with eyes narrowed in surprise, "you've given us more information on the mages involved than we've ever had, and you haven't even seen the house yet.

Even if you see nothing more today, you've already done something big to advance my search. I won't forget it."

Zeke was so used to thinking of his gift as a joke that he wasn't sure how to respond.

He wanted to help find the woman—and those behind her—that had caused Celine such profound grief.

He wanted to be part of the search that Santini had claimed for himself.

He just wasn't sure what more he could contribute.

He wanted to offer his skills as a Spec Ops soldier, but would the master chief immediately dismiss him because he was still just a regular guy, and his so-called gift hadn't enhanced his fighting skills? There was only one way to find out.

"Master Chief, I want you to know that if you need an extra pair of hands in the field, you can count on me. I know I'm not one of your people, but I have skills. Battle-tested skills that are going to waste as I sit on my ass on this island. I want to help, and I want you to know that."

Santini eyed him speculatively for a moment, then surprised Zeke with his thoughtful response.

“I know you’re a skilled operator, Zeke. I’ve seen your file. My question is why? Why do you want to risk your own safety for the sake of my investigation? It’s not sanctioned by Uncle Sam.”

“The government isn’t the only arbiter of what’s right,” Zeke replied quietly. “I’ve lost family to violence. I know a bit of what Celine is feeling. If I can help her get justice, I will, because it’s the right thing to do. The evil that came against your family can’t be allowed to continue.”

“Well, hot damn,” Santini mused with the hint of a smile playing about his face as he turned to contemplate the sky in front of their bench that was just beginning to lighten the barest bit with the hint of dawn.

“You sound like a shifter. I thought we were the only ones who talked about evil like that.”

“I think you’ll find, Master Chief, that all of the guys in my unit have a healthy disrespect for the evil scumbags of this world. That’s why we signed up to do what we do. Or did , I guess. None of us are really happy being sidelined.” Zeke scuffed his boot along the dirt at his feet.

“I can respect that,” Santini replied quietly.

They sat together quietly while the sun began its daily rise in the eastern sky and the rest of the team assigned to this mission began appearing at the boat ramp.

Zeke deposited the debris from his make-shift breakfast into a nearby trash can and went to help with preparations, nodding respectfully to the master chief as he also

rose and went to confer with some of his people.

The trip to Connecticut didn't take long.

The house was right along the shore with its own private dock.

Zeke realized pretty quickly that Celine's family had to be quite wealthy in order to afford such a stunning waterfront property.

Not only was she a shifter, but she was a rich girl.

He'd known a few rich girls in his time, and none of them had wanted to go slumming with a guy like him who'd been very close to becoming a gang banger like his brother.

Zeke thought he'd gotten over his humble beginnings a long time ago, so the self-doubt that arrived on the heels of discovering a little bit more about Celine's past surprised him.

He'd spent a lot of time overcoming his past. He'd joined the Army and received an education better than any he ever could've expected, given his start in life.

He'd proven to himself, and to others, that he wasn't just some dumb kid from the hood.

He had advanced degrees in archaeology and a whole lot of specialized field experience in both his chosen profession and as a Special Forces soldier.

He understood several languages, including a few ancient ones that were no longer spoken.

He had earned his sharpshooter medals alongside the rest of his unit.

He could go hand-to-hand with anyone, anytime.

He had both physical prowess and mental fortitude, but seeing the posh way Celine had grown up set him back on his heels a bit.

For fuck's sake .

Zeke was a little disgusted with himself and his thoughts.

He had to get his head on straight and get over himself already.

He had a job to do. He wouldn't let the unit down.

He wouldn't let Celine down. She might be a rich girl, but she'd been hurt badly by the violence done to her family.

He wanted to help her find justice, and he would do so—rich girl or not.

Psyching himself up silently, he stepped onto the dock and got ready to go to work.

He was in the real world now, and there was still a price on his head, so he had to stay sharp.

They had discussed the plan for how this would go down before they'd even left the island.

Zeke was one of the last men out of the boat.

One would stay behind at the helm and two on the dock to watch for trouble.

Master Chief Santini and his granddaughter had been among the first to go ashore.

Three of the shifter soldiers had gone ahead, making their way quickly up the back lawn to the house, checking to make sure there were no surprises.

Celine and her grandfather followed in their tracks, slightly behind.

Rick was waiting for Zeke to catch up. Rick was here to keep an eye on Zeke, observing him as he put his new gift to use.

“Master Chief asked us to give him a moment with Celine, before we head inside,” Rick said in a low voice as Zeke came up beside him. “She hasn’t been back since the murder, has she?”

“No, she hasn’t,” Zeke replied, watching Santini put his arm around his granddaughter’s shoulders as they walked up the steps leading to an expansive deck that ran the length of the back of the house.

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Although, the word house didn't really fit the bill.

It was more like a mansion. The building had a coastal feel to it, like many of the structures Zeke had seen in his travels in New England, but on a much grander scale than the simple Cape Cod style houses that populated so many neighborhoods up and down the coast. White clapboard siding and lots of property with trees all around meant privacy. And, likely, a very high price tag.

The nearest neighbors weren't actually that close, affording their group a great deal of privacy as they went about their business.

As a result, everybody was wearing their uniforms and carrying their gear openly.

They were on private property, with the property owner's permission, and her presence.

Because it was Celine who owned this house now that her parents were gone.

If she wanted to allow military men to run around on her land, she had every right to do so.

And considering how isolated the place was, nobody would be the wiser as long as they kept things quiet. The neighbors couldn't see a thing.

Zeke knew they had chosen this location because of their dual nature.

It would be easy enough for a water shifter to take to the ocean from here without

being seen.

The isolation had also probably helped the murderer get away with doing her evil.

Nobody had heard or seen anything, which was why the trail had grown so cold. And why Zeke was here.

Right. Time to get to work.

Rick and Zeke followed Santini's path up onto the huge deck. Zeke saw the open sliding glass doors that took up a large swath of the back of the house. It was more like a glass wall with panels that slid to allow people in and out of the back of the house. Swanky.

One of the huge panels was already open, and Zeke saw Celine standing in the opening with her grandfather's arm around her shoulders.

Zeke wanted to go to her but knew he couldn't.

The master chief would console her. Zeke had to get his mind off her and onto his work.

He might not be good enough for her, but he would do all in his power to help her get justice for her parents.

Rick held Zeke back before they got to the door.

Zeke was wearing gloves and was armed, like the rest of the team, but only in case of surprises.

He was here to do his psychometric thing, and that was all.

If he had to pull his weapon, they were all in serious shit.

Still, he'd been a soldier long enough that he felt naked without a weapon and rarely went anywhere unarmed.

Zeke took off the black glove from his left hand.

He was wearing tactical gloves today that went with his black tactical vest and black cargo pants.

Every pocket contained something useful that he carried out of long-standing habit from years of field work.

Today, he'd flex that new gift of his and see if he could find clues.

It was a little bit like archaeology. Sort of.

He was still looking for clues in the past, only his toolbox was somewhat... expanded.

Zeke almost snorted at his own thoughts.

Stowing his glove on his belt, he knelt to touch his hand to the wood of the deck and shut his eyes to sort out the images.

He spoke quietly to Rick as he established a baseline for this new place and got a feel for it.

They'd agreed this was probably the best way to proceed, given that they didn't know too much yet about how his gift worked.

Rick had suggested he ease his way into things, and this was as good a place to start as any.

“Bare feet. Splinters. Laughter. Summer barbecues and the occasional gathering,” Zeke said, moving his hand around the wooden deck and sorting through the echoes of past events it contained.

He didn’t share the images of a much younger Celine giggling as she ran across the deck heading for the back lawn.

She had grown up in this giant house, and it had been a loving home for many years based on what he could see.

It looked like an almost idyllic childhood, which was a far cry from his own experience as a kid.

He was happy for her. Glad that she’d had a joyful youth, especially considering what she’d been through in more recent years.

He stood and walked closer to the glass door.

Rick was following close behind. Celine and her grandfather met him near the doorway.

Zeke could see with one glance that this big living room was the scene of the crime he had witnessed from touching that stone yesterday.

The place was still in disarray, though the blood had been cleaned up.

Sort of. The upholstery and carpeting were discolored where the bloodstains had been removed with bleach.

It would all have to be replaced if anybody wanted to live here again.

Though it was a lovely house, Zeke doubted that Celine would ever want to live here again.

There was no way thoughts of her parents, the way she had last seen them, wouldn't intrude on her peace.

Santini still had his arm around Celine's shoulders, and Zeke had to look away from the expression on her face.

If he didn't, he might do something rash and go over to her and pulled her into his arms. He couldn't do that.

He didn't have the right. Not yet. Probably not ever, despite how thoughts of her invaded his mind at all times these days.

"Is this where it happened?" Rick asked gently.

Master Chief Santini nodded, as did Zeke.

"I've seen this room before," Zeke clarified, knowing his tone was a bit grim.

"Take it slow. Like we discussed," Rick advised.

"Yes, sir," Zeke replied, already looking at the objects he would target in his psychometric work.

He'd start with the general room and then zero in on the places where the violence had been at its worst. Something near the couch was calling him, and he gazed quickly around.

There was something odd about one of the lamps on an end table, but he had to be methodical about this and stick to the plan they'd made before ever setting foot on the boat.

He and Rick had agreed on a course of action so that if he got in too deep, his friend would be ready to pull him out.

But Zeke wouldn't let that happen. There was no such thing as too deep when it came to helping Celine find the answers she needed.

He'd do what he had to do and grit his teeth to stay conscious.

Rick would understand, and they'd carry Zeke out on a stretcher if they had to, but either way, Celine would have some answers.

With grim determination, Zeke held his hand out and touched the wall.

Echoes of the past came to him almost immediately.

"Emptiness. A caretaker coming to check on things every once in a while. The cleaning crew. Bleach."

Zeke actually smelled the chemicals the cleaners had used as he went back in time.

The images were gentle for now. Seen from afar.

From the wall's point of view, as it were.

He braced himself as time kept turning back in his mind.

He saw the confrontation from across the room.

It had happened closer to the front of the house, and the combatants hadn't strayed this far back, so the echoes weren't as strong.

It was actually like watching a movie play out on a faraway screen.

He'd have to remember to tell Rick that this plan they'd formulated about starting from the wall and moving inward was definitely a good way to ease him into the deeper work that would come later.

"I see the mage. Her skin is very dark. She's kind of short—maybe five foot two or so—with wild, curly black hair.

She's wearing a loud yellow blouse and turquoise blue pants under a deep red cloak.

The cloak has runes on the edges, and somehow...

Her face is blurred. That feels like magic, though I'm no expert," Zeke mused.

"It could very well be," Santini put in quietly as Rick took notes.

Zeke watched the events unfold in his mind's eye.

He'd seen it before, when he touched the stone.

Only this time, he had a much wider viewpoint.

That was good for the overall action. He could clearly see the sequence of events.

But it didn't give him the finer details that might lead to better clues for the investigation.

He'd have to work his way up to that, but this was a good start.

Zeke lowered his hand to his side, disengaging from the wall, and eyed his next target.

The mage. That's who they needed to know about.

He had to go where she'd been and see if he could glean anything from the things she'd touched.

It was a roundabout way to search, but he didn't have any other ideas at the moment.

He'd start with retracing the mage's steps.

He hadn't quite figured out yet how she had gotten into the house.

Maybe that would tell them something, if he could puzzle it out.

Treading carefully, he stepped where she had stepped, crouching down to touch each ghostly footprint only he could see in his mind, as he followed her progress backwards from the confrontation to where she'd been lying in wait.

Yes . She'd been waiting for them to come home.

Cursing under his breath, he turned to Rick.

"She was here, waiting for them, when they arrived home," he reported, moving to the coat closet and opening the door with his gloved right hand.

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He went inside, crouching again and touching the walls and the objects around him, as the mage had.

Images bombarded his mind. Some were from the mage.

Some were from older events attached to each object.

A friendly summer tennis game was embedded in the strings of a racket leaning against the wall.

A game of catch on the back lawn with a very young Celine was attached to a large ball shoved toward the back of the small space.

Zeke focused and tried to work the events of the mage's wait backwards, seeing her moving in slow motion, and in reverse, from the time she sprang out of the small space to accost Celine's parents, working backward to the time she entered the closet.

He followed the path backward, his hands on the carpet, the walls, anything she might have touched, searching for the echoes that would tell him how she'd gotten into the house.

What he found surprised him.

"She had the alarm code," Zeke reported as he passed his fingertips lightly over the keypad by the side door. "Three eight two seven," he went on, seeing the code being pressed into the keys as he watched events of the past unfold like a movie in his mind.

“How could she have known that?” Celine asked, her tone shocked.

Zeke opened his eyes and met hers across the room. She’d been following his progress but clung to her grandfather’s arm for support as Zeke worked.

“We’ll work on finding that answer,” the master chief said, his expression grim.

Zeke nodded to the older man and went back to work. He followed the mage’s path out the side door and down the walkway toward the front of the house, but it veered off into the trees. Touching each tree, he followed as best he could to a neighboring property.

The rest of the team held back at Zeke’s hand signal.

They hadn’t drawn attention to their presence so far, but he was getting closer to the property line and wasn’t sure what he’d find on the other side.

Still, he had to follow the trail to see if he could find out where the mage had come from.

He paused and touched a tree that the woman had brushed as she’d made her way through the strip of dense woodland.

Without a sound, Master Chief Santini and Celine came up to stand just behind him. The rest of the team held back, out of sight. Though Zeke suspected the shifters who had come with them were spread out through the trees, blending in and keeping watch.

“Who lives over there?” Zeke asked, pointing toward the edge of the forested area, toward a house that was just becoming visible through the tightly packed tree trunks.

“It belongs to a senator,” Celine said softly. “Though it’s empty most of the year. Her family uses it for vacations, mostly.”

“Ah. That makes sense. So, what are the chances someone’s there right now? Or that anybody was there at the time of the murders?” Zeke asked.

“Low,” Celine responded. “They’ve never been here this time of year. And they weren’t in residence when Mom and Dad died.”

“What’s surveillance like on that property? Do you know, Master Chief?” Zeke asked, betting that the old sailor probably had intel on every house around the one where his son and daughter-in-law had died.

“They’ve got a basic security system. A few cameras that are easily avoided. Not full coverage. The cops asked every neighbor for their recordings just after the murders, but there was nothing found on any of them,” Santini said, confirming Zeke’s suppositions.

“I’m going to follow the trail as far as it will take me. Is there camera coverage on this side of the house?” Zeke asked, already moving to the next tree that held a tiny trace of the mage’s passage in its long memory.

“There’s one on the corner of the house, but the angle is narrow, confined to the side of the house itself, going out to about ten feet from the foundation.

I suspect the installer chose to focus on the windows and side door rather than the parking area,” Santini replied in a quiet voice that didn’t carry.

Zeke nodded. “I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

Then, he went forward, slowly, gleaning all he could from the trees that he passed.

It was both harder and easier to read living objects like trees and plants because they had a somewhat different way of holding the information about past happenings.

Zeke did his best to focus on the timeframe he needed, though he caught the passage of a few deer and a family of racoons in the recent images.

Still, the mage's passage brought with it a sense of distaste that he hadn't expected.

It was as if the forest itself didn't like the flavor of her energy or something.

Zeke made a mental note to talk that over with Lynn after this was all over.

For now, his focus had to be on the night a year ago when Celine's parents had died.

He focused his new talent and went back to work.

He had to find out everything he could in order to help the woman who had become so important to him in such a short time.

Zeke stayed clear of the camera on the side of the house, as had the mage, he soon realized. She must have known she could use the senator's driveway with impunity because he felt faint echoes of a car the mage had parked far to the side of the wide drive, near the trees. There, he lost her trail.

Annoyed, he made his way back into the trees. It was as he touched one of the old oaks on his way back to where Celine and her grandfather waited that he had a flash of further insight. He stopped short and pressed his palm to the tree trunk.

"There was another visit," he whispered to himself, though the shifters seemed to hear him.

Santini's eyes narrowed as Celine jerked her shoulders in shock.

"The mage did a trial run...or something. It wasn't close in time to the murder.

It was before. I can't tell how long before.

The tree's sense of time is interfering a bit.

But I think it was a year earlier. Possibly two.

That mage walked these woods and brushed up against this tree, which feels like it has strong opinions about the mage.

It didn't like her at all." Zeke scrunched up his face.

How could a tree not like someone? He'd have to think about that later.

Santini's jaw firmed as he ground his molars together in obviously controlled anger. He didn't like this news any more than Zeke did. It indicated that Celine's family had been under observation and threat a lot longer than they'd realized.

Zeke made his way back toward the Santini house, pausing at every likely tree to see if he could learn more about the earlier visit of the mage.

A few of the trees confirmed what he'd seen from touching the oak.

He would keep at it until he had a clearer picture of what had happened all those months ago.

Celine deserved to know as much as he could discern of the danger that had stalked her family.

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Celine watched Zeke work his way through the trees, going slow, his eyes closing as he seemed to listen to something only he could hear.

She was fascinated by his gift and seeing it in action.

It wasn't showy or obvious, but it was spectacular in its results.

She couldn't believe the missing data he'd been able to fill in surrounding that terrible night—and even more.

The idea that the evil mage had been to their house before that night was terrifying.

She'd lived here, feeling secure that her small family had their privacy and the secret of their magical existence was safe considering that they had a private dock from which to enter and exit the water without observation by the neighbors.

That someone had known where they lived, and for how long, nearly knocked the breath out of her.

They'd been in danger long before the murders had occurred if Zeke's information was to be believed.

He hadn't been wrong yet, and she believed in his power.

She knew what he said was true, even though it shook the foundations of her beliefs in her previous existence.

They'd been careful, as a family, not to be observed or to act differently than their human neighbors.

Somehow, all their precautions had been for naught.

Somehow, that mage had known about them and targeted them for far longer than she'd thought.

Her grandfather kept his arm around her as they followed Zeke back toward the house.

Her friends and fellow shifters were all around, though none could be seen.

They were there for backup, should it be needed, but right now, she felt surrounded in safety with them all here.

She would remember to thank each and every one of them for their participation in today's mission.

It meant the world to her to have their support.

And especially Zeke and his friends, though mostly Zeke.

He'd really gone above and beyond for her.

She wanted to hug him close and let him know just how special he was becoming to her, though she wasn't sure hugging him would be appropriate.

She wasn't sure how it worked with humans and displays of affection.

Particularly, military humans. They had so many rules and regulations that she found

hard to navigate, and this was one time she definitely couldn't ask her grandfather for clarification.

She followed behind as Zeke let go of the last of the trees he was examining. He looked at her, and her grandfather ushered her closer to Zeke for a quick conversation.

"That's all I can get from here," Zeke said, addressing her grandfather with the occasional glance her way. "I'm going back into the house, and I'll try to read objects closer to the scene of the crime."

Celine noticed the doctor of the Green Beret unit move up next to Zeke.

He'd been listening, a frown on his face, but he didn't speak.

He just followed close behind as Zeke turned to move back into the house.

Celine went to follow, but her grandfather held her back with a gentle hand on her arm. She turned to face him.

"Maybe we should just let him do his work and get the report later," Gramps suggested, but Celine shook her head.

"I want to watch him work and hear what he has to say without a filter," she insisted.

She knew Gramps was only trying to protect her, but she needed to hear whatever Zeke might see and be there for him.

She had the impression from his colleagues that his gift could be dangerous to him and—silly as it might seem—she wanted to watch over him in whatever small way she could while he tried his best to help her find answers.

When she entered the house once more, her grandfather hot on her heels, she stopped short just inside, concerned by the look of pained concentration on Zeke's face as he knelt near the sofa. She had found her parents' bodies, and her father had been very close to where Zeke was now.

"The woman sprang out of the closet and was already casting—if that's the right word—her magic at them.

I think she tried to freeze them in place, but they were stronger than she'd expected, and her magic didn't fully trap them.

Both fought back and advanced on her as she rushed to meet them.

She had a black dagger in her hand. A wicked-looking thing with a curvy blade that had glowing red glyphs on the blade.

I'm not sure if the blade was made of metal or some kind of stone...

maybe?" He tilted his head, his eyes closed in concentration.

"Can you describe the glyphs?" Rick asked, taking notes as Zeke spoke.

"I can draw them," Zeke replied, lifting his head and reached for the pad and pen Rick held out.

He did a quick sketch and handed the pad and pen back to his friend, then put his hand out to touch the floor where Celine's father had fallen once more. His expression tightened, and his eyes shut as he immersed himself back into the echoes.

It went on like this for another half hour, each new object Zeke touched eliciting a bit more information.

Rick took notes, as did some of the military shifters, Celine realized belatedly.

They would have as complete a record as possible of the psychometric readings Zeke was doing of each object.

No recordings were being made due to the heightened security surrounding the Green Beret unit and their gifts.

Gramps had explained that to her. Everything was being done in hard copy so nobody could possibly tap into their information via electronic systems. As long as the records were only kept on paper and on the island, they were secure.

Once something was put on a computer linked to an outside system, security could not be guaranteed.

Zeke moved on to the next object. It was a lamp that had been laying on the floor, next to her mother's body.

It hadn't broken, so it had just been put back in place after the cleanup.

Celine never wanted to see it again. She never wanted to see any part of this room again and would likely leave it all behind once she figured out what her next step was going to be.

For now, she just left the house locked and stayed on the island with her grandfather.

She knew she couldn't do that forever, but it worked for the time being.

When Zeke touched the lamp, he immediately recoiled, and his friend Rick stepped closer.

The tension in the room elevated as everyone turned to examine Zeke and his rather obvious reaction.

He turned to look in her direction, but his eyes didn't meet hers.

No, he was looking at her grandfather, standing just behind her shoulder.

A nod passed from man to man, and Zeke said something in a low voice to Rick.

Unfortunately, even with her heightened shifter senses, Celine couldn't hear what he said, but she watched as he went back to the lamp and took a more cautious approach than she'd seen him take with any of the other objects in the room.

He held out just one fingertip, at first, his eyes closing and his expression tightening.

Then, he added another finger and then a third.

His face scrunched up as if he was in serious pain, but he kept going.

A moment later, with a wrenching gesture, he tore his hand away from the lamp and shook his head as if to clear it.

He hadn't spoken a word throughout the ordeal, but his expression was grim as he left the room without looking back. Rick followed close behind.

"What was that all about?" Celine asked her grandfather.

"I'm not sure, but I think we'd better take a closer look at that lamp, just in case," Gramps replied.

He didn't elaborate on what he meant. In case of what?

In case there was more information Zeke could get from it?

In order to preserve it in case the mage—or someone else—came back and trashed her empty house?

Maybe both of those. She just wasn't sure, and she didn't have a chance to ask further questions as her grandfather led her out of the house, after the men.

"Do we take that lamp with us?" one of the shifters asked Gramps as they were moving.

"Negative," came the reply from one of the other shifters. Liam Kinkaid, Celine saw as she looked around to find the tall blond lion shifter who was in charge of the Navy contingent on this mission. "Doc says to leave it here and let no one else touch it."

Well, that solved that problem. Gramps kept going, issuing a few orders to subordinates for someone to close up the house and lock everything. All the while, he was escorting her toward the waiting boat, following Zeke and Rick's footsteps.

When they reached the dock, Zeke was already in the boat, his head thrown back and his eyes closed as he took deep breaths. Whatever he'd seen must have been intense if it affected him this badly. His friend Rick was checking him over, and Zeke had put his gloves back on, she noticed.

She got into the boat, taking a seat along one side, near Zeke.

She wanted to keep an eye on him but didn't want to be too obvious about it both for his sake and her own.

She didn't want her shifter kin to stick their noses into her growing feelings for Zeke.

She wasn't entirely certain about them, herself, and didn't need nosy friends asking probing questions.

Which they would. Shifters were just like that.

It was both reassuring and annoying, at times.

For Zeke's part, she didn't want to embarrass him.

She had seen enough of men of all species to know they carried a lot of pride.

Particularly the warriors. They didn't like being seen in moments of what might be perceived as weakness, and she wouldn't draw unnecessary attention to Zeke when he was still recovering from whatever shocking thing he'd witnessed when touching that lamp.

No matter how curious she was about what he'd seen.

She had the distinct impression that she wouldn't want to hear the details, though in her heart, she knew she must. She needed to know everything about how her parents had died.

No matter if it upset her or not. She owed them that much—to investigate until she had every possible scrap of information so that she could hunt down their killer and avenge their deaths.

Zeke recovered his composure as the others got on board and took their places. There was a flurry of radio chatter, and then, her grandfather sat down near her, though he was speaking to the Army guys.

“Reports of strange boating activity a little too close for comfort,” Gramps told the other men.

“We'd better get this show on the road,” Liam said as he got on board. He gave the

signal to cast off, and then, they were back on the water, heading for the island.

“They were watching us,” Zeke said, clearing his throat to speak to Liam.

“Come again?” Liam asked, his gaze shooting to Zeke.

“That lamp had some kind of magical mojo on it. I think it was telling the mage, or whoever, that we were there. I think the boat activity is the response. Either we outrun them or we might have a confrontation on the water in our very near future.”

“Well, fuck,” Liam muttered.

He went forward in the boat to issue orders to the man driving and the other shifters at his command.

Weapons were discreetly pulled out and checked while everyone seemed to take up defensive positions around the sides of the boat.

Celine felt herself settle as her grandfather readied his own weapon and scanned the water with intent.

She wasn't in the military, but her seal spirit was used to hunting and fighting when necessary.

She wasn't exactly a shrinking violet, but she didn't have a weapon.

She huddled against the side of the boat and kept her eyes peeled.

If she spotted anything, she could at least send up a warning to those who could fight back.

Zeke was still trying to recover from the magical whammy that stupid lamp had hit him with, but he knew a strike team had to be on their way.

For just a moment, he'd connected with the mage...

maybe. He wouldn't be sure until he had a chance to talk to Lynn about the magical side of things, but it really had felt like the mage who had set the spell—or whatever it was—had been looking back at him for the briefest of moments there.

That shit had rocked him to his foundations, and the zap of power that came down the line at him had nearly knocked him unconscious.

Only letting go of that fucking lamp had saved him from getting truly fried.

He believed that with no doubt in his mind.

No matter how strange that sounded to his rational, human, non-magical brain.

Magic was real, and he had to come to grips with that.

Further, he had a wacky new skill that allowed him to do stuff that he had never even dreamed of before.

He hadn't used his skill much until now.

At least, not for anything truly important.

But tracking the murderer and making them pay was important to Celine, and important to him too.

Following the leads he'd seen so far meant that the murderer was also connected to

someone who had been on the unit's radar for a very long time.

This investigation had farther-reaching implications than he'd thought.

All of which made it important and a worthy stretching of his new magical muscles.

He had to get better at this psychometry shit.

That's all there was to it. He couldn't afford to mess this up, and if his newfound ability could help, he had to make it count as best he could.

It might be a wimpy sort of gift, but it was his, and he'd do all he could to make it work.

Which meant not getting caught in magical traps, apparently.

He'd have to add that to his list of precautions because there had been something really strange about that lamp.

He should have been more aware of it earlier.

He should have trusted his instincts and examined it sooner.

If so, there might not have been time for the mage to call in the goon squad.

And, right on time, Zeke spotted them. Three boats zooming toward them at ridiculous speeds for this kind of weather.

There was a storm out at sea, and though the weather close to shore was only partly cloudy, the water was stirred up a bit with small whitecaps all around them as they sped back toward base.

Zeke's gaze sought Celine, making sure she was safe, but he didn't like the way she was clutching the side of the boat and peering out over the water.

He wondered if her natural instincts would guide her to seek the water if she sensed danger.

If so, he couldn't predict the outcome. She could swim to safety, but she had to surface for air every few minutes and if they were watching for her to do just that, she could be trapped. Or killed.

That mage had been sent to kill her and her parents. It was likely that she would have given her strike team a kill order since she'd missed Celine on the first try.

Zeke's weapon was at the ready, as were those of every soldier around him, except maybe for the one driving the boat. He had his eyes on the course they'd set and was already making evasive maneuvers to try to outrun or escape the oncoming boats.

Even as their boat swayed and swung in crazy arcs, using the waves to camouflage them as best they could, gunfire erupted from the oncoming marauders.

Liam gave the command, and the shifters were both economical and deadly with their return fire.

Zeke watched as more than one man went down on the other boats, but they were more wasteful of their ammo and were firing indiscriminately.

One of the shifters in the bow was grazed with a bullet, ducking out of the way just in time to prevent a more serious injury as Zeke sucked in a breath.

This was insane. Those guys didn't seem to care who they killed or what they damaged.

They were out for blood and would take any on offer, it seemed.

Zeke's eyes went to Celine as they were all knocked around by the wild maneuvers of their own boat, trying to hide in the troughs of the waves for short periods of time.

Then, they crested a wave, and Celine was bumped to her feet.

Red bloomed on her shirt, and Zeke's heart stood still. She'd been shot!

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Celine screamed, and Zeke's heart nearly stopped. He saw her fall into the water, a flash of red following her. Blood. She was bleeding!

Without giving it a second thought, he dove in after her as the boat sped on, trying to dodge pursuit.

In fact, the pursuing boats followed, leaving Zeke in the water far from shore.

Celine had to be around here somewhere. He dove and did his best to search for her.

Thankfully, he'd spent a lot of time training in the water and felt at home in this element.

Of course, Celine was a selkie. She might've shifted into her seal form, but he wasn't certain.

The only thing he knew was that he had to find her. He had to make sure she was all right.

He caught the impression of motion to his left and went in that direction. A moment later, he'd found Celine, underwater and in her human form, her wet clothing weighing her down a bit. He guided her to the surface so they could talk.

"Where were you hit?" he asked the moment their heads were above the water.

She nodded, grimacing. "My arm. And it hurts worse than anything I've felt before. I think the bullet is still in there, and it burns like silver." Her tone was a bit breathless

with the pain.

“Silver burns?”

Zeke’s sluggish mind recalled something Lynn had been telling him about how many magical folk couldn’t touch silver.

It was poison to vampires, in particular, and could drive them mad.

It also affected shifters, which was probably what gave rise to the old stories about silver bullets being able to stop werewolves.

“Silver is poison to us,” Celine gasped. “I tried to shift, and I can’t. That’s why I think it’s silver. It messes with our magic.”

“Okay,” Zeke said, thinking through their options.

The shore of the island wasn’t too far away for him to swim, but she only had the use of one arm.

He would tow her in, helping her get to shore.

From there, Rick could probably help her where the shifter medics couldn’t.

As far as Zeke knew, nobody in his unit had a problem with silver.

They were human, after all. Not shifters or vampires or any other sort of magical race.

They could handle the silver that would send the shifters running.

He also took a look out over the water, realizing the boats were speeding away, toward the boat ramp—and the reinforcing troops—on the other side of their island base.

Apparently, the shooters hadn't noticed when Celine had fallen overboard, or when Zeke had followed her.

They had a little time. He tested his in-ear radio.

The gear they used was waterproof, for the most part.

Getting a signal, he listened in on the rest of his team.

They were busy with the ongoing assault.

He'd report in once things settled down a bit, or if someone demanded a report from him.

Otherwise, he'd concentrate on getting Celine to safety.

"This is what we're going to do," he told her. "I'm going to help you get to shore, then we'll get our doctor to take a look at your arm."

She looked up at him with hope in her eyes alongside the pain. "That sounds like a good plan," she replied a bit shakily. "I can't really swim like this, so I could use a little help. I can kick with my feet, but my arms..." She trailed off, cringing.

"Don't worry," Zeke said, moving to put her good arm around him so she had a good grasp. "I'll take care of you, babe." He couldn't help himself. He bent to place a kiss on her cheek. "Just hold on to me with your good arm. I'll tow you to shore. If it gets to be too much, let me know, okay?"

“Okay,” she replied, her voice filled with pain and tinged with fear. He didn’t like that sound, but he’d make it better. He had to. She was too damned important to him.

The swim back to shore was slow going. He started off strong with her grip tight around him, but as they grew closer to the beach, her strength flagged.

If silver was poison to her system, he reasoned through his own panic, she could be losing strength with every stroke.

He redoubled his efforts to get her to shore, but when they were still yards out, she lost her grip on him entirely.

He caught her in his arms before she could float away and realized she was unconscious.

Shit!

It was past time for him to report in to his unit. They’d run off the attackers and were heading back to base. He’d followed their progress on the radio but hadn’t interrupted while they were in the thick of things. Now was his moment.

“This is Zeke. Do you copy?”

“Copy, Zeke. Go ahead. Sit rep,” their commander ordered, wanting a situation report .

“I’ve got the girl. She’s got a bullet in her arm, preventing her from swimming. I’m towing her to shore. She lost consciousness a moment ago. Suspected silver poisoning. Can Rick meet us on the beach?”

“He’s on his way,” Captain Haliwell reported.

Zeke felt relief rush through him. “I’m aiming for the beach behind our building. It’s the closest,” he reported as he continued to swim, taking Celine in a different hold now that she was unconscious.

“Understood. We have eyes on you, and people coming out to help.”

“Warn the others about the silver,” Zeke said, sparing a moment to remind his friends about the differences between what they could handle versus what the shifters could.

“Roger that. They’ll proceed with caution, but they’ll watch your back.”

A minute later, Zeke had Celine a bit closer to shore, and a half-dozen seals formed a sort of honor guard around them as he brought her closer to the beach.

It was a relief to have them there. They were, no doubt, selkies.

They would watch out for enemies, allowing Zeke to focus on getting Celine to safety.

Minutes later, he was carrying her out of the surf and up the beach. Rick and a few others were running down the beach, heading straight for them. When they met, Rick took charge.

“Put her down,” he ordered. Zeke did as he was told, but he didn’t release her to lay on the rough sand. Instead, he kept his arms around her, holding her while Rick made a quick examination.

“She was hit in the arm. She suspected the bullet was still in there and that it was silver. She was in a lot of pain before she passed out,” Zeke reported.

He looked up, realizing there was a small circle of concerned people around them. It

was a mixed group of men from his unit and some of their new shifter friends. Among them was Liam Kinkaid.

“Silver is poisonous to us. Probably why she couldn’t shift,” Liam offered. The other shifters in the circle nodded in agreement and looked concerned.

“Luckily, I was born without magic, and since acquiring it, I haven’t felt any aversion to silver,” Rick said as he laid his hands over the wound on Celine’s arm.

He closed his eyes for a moment, and a split second later, the bloody bullet rose out of the wound, and he grabbed it with his fingers.

He handed it off to Dan Vogel, another member of the unit, who was assisting.

Dan put it into a small plastic bag and tucked it into his pocket.

Zeke made a note to examine that little lump of silver later, to see if he could learn anything about the asshole who had put that bullet into his gun and shot Zeke’s woman. He felt like growling. Suddenly, he was feeling very possessive of the delicate woman in his arms.

“How is she?” a gruff voice entered the circle. Zeke looked up to see Master Chief Santini had arrived to check on his granddaughter.

“Bullet’s out,” Rick reported, continuing his work. As everyone watched, the wound began to heal, as if by magic.

“It was most likely silver,” Dan, whose specialist area was geology, reported quietly while Rick continued his work.

“Bastards!” the master chief spat angrily.

“It’s okay. All the silver is out. She’s just weak, but she’ll be all right,” Rick said, opening his eyes as he lifted his hands. The wound on Celine’s arm was gone.

“Thank the Goddess for that,” Santini said on a gusty sigh. Then, he turned to look at Rick. “And thanks to you and your amazing gift, Doc. And you...” Santini turned his dark gaze on Zeke, “Thanks for getting her to shore.”

Zeke just nodded at the man as he felt Celine stir in his arms. He looked down at her to see her eyelids fluttering as she rose from unconsciousness. Then her beautiful eyes opened, and she gazed up at him. Relief flooded his body.

“Zeke,” she whispered, resting in his arms for just a moment before she tried to sit up. He helped her, supporting her back as she looked at her arm, then back to him.

“Doc fixed you up,” Zeke said softly, indicating Rick with a slight lift of his chin. Her confused eyes moved to look at Rick, then widened as she took in the circle of concerned people standing around them.

“Thank you,” she said to Rick in a soft tone, then she spotted her grandfather. But she didn’t move away as Zeke expected. Instead, she looked back at Zeke, meeting his gaze. “Thank you for diving in after me. I never knew a human could be so good in the water. Did I pass out?”

“Just at the end there,” Zeke admitted to her. “You were a real trooper most of the way.”

“You were shot with silver, pumpkin,” Master Chief Santini said, going down on one knee next to her. “I’m amazed you got as far as you did before succumbing. But Doc here got it all out, and you’ll be fine. Right, Doc?”

“Absolutely. Though you’ll probably be weaker than usual for a day or so. I haven’t

treated many of your kind and don't really know enough about the effect silver has on your systems, but that's my best guess based on the information I have," Rick said, picking up his medical kit.

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“That sounds about right,” Santini agreed.

“I’ve had a run-in or two with the blasted metal in my life.

It weakens us for a time, but as long as you clear it all, our natural healing abilities kick in relatively quickly.

” Santini dropped lower and put his hand on his granddaughter’s cheek in a show of affection.

“Let’s get you inside, pumpkin. You need to rest and recover. ”

“All right,” she replied and tried to push herself upward, but she was too weak. Zeke lifted her in his arms, and she allowed it, probably realizing she was just too tired to try to walk the distance herself.

“Where to?” Zeke asked Santini, who was watching him with a speculative look in his eyes. He said nothing, though, for which Zeke was grateful.

Zeke couldn’t let Celine go. Not yet. Not when he’d come so close to losing her.

If that bullet had been just a few inches to the right, she could have died.

As it was, if he hadn’t managed to find her in the ocean, she might have lost consciousness out there in the water, unable to shift.

Even if she could have shifted, she wasn’t a fish.

Seals needed to come up for air at some point.

She could have drowned, and none of that sat well with Zeke. Not at all.

“Put her in my Jeep,” Santini said quietly, leading Zeke to the side of the barracks building where a few vehicles were parked. “I’ll take her back to her quarters and make sure someone checks on her the rest of today and throughout the night.”

Zeke didn’t like that she’d be in another building on another part of the base, but he didn’t have a right to demand that she stay in his unit’s building.

She wasn’t his wife, or even his girlfriend.

She had her own room on another part of the base that was devoted to shifters.

She’d rest there, and the best he could hope for was to see her again as soon as she’d recovered enough to get around.

He didn’t like that either but couldn’t really find a way around it.

Although... He looked around, catching Rick’s eye. Hopefully, Rick would understand his pleading expression.

“I’d like to keep an eye on her as well, Master Chief,” Rick said, stepping up as they made careful progress toward the cars.

“As you saw, we don’t have a problem handling silver, and I have some diagnostic abilities that will allow me to sense right away if there are any further complications.

I’d like to check on her in the morning, if that’s all right with you.

Sooner, if she's in any sort of discomfort.

I'm available at all hours, so please don't hesitate to call. ”

“I appreciate it, Doc,” Santini said, genuine respect on his face if Zeke was any judge. “And I'm grateful for your care of my granddaughter. Both of you.” The master chief included Zeke in his gaze. “You've gone above and beyond for my family, and I owe you.”

“No, sir,” Zeke said gently, shaking his head.

“There is no debt. We take care of our own, and you and Celine are part of our family now.” He didn't know where the words were coming from, but they felt right.

He noticed Rick was nodding his own agreement, for which Zeke was grateful.

“You both look after us every day. This is just us returning the favor.” Zeke tried to soften his declaration, lifting the corner of his mouth in a friendly half-smile, but Santini didn't respond immediately.

Instead, he looked consideringly at Zeke, then to Rick, but settling back on Zeke and the silent girl in his arms as they stopped beside the off-road vehicle.

Then, Santini opened the door of the Jeep, and Zeke stooped a bit to settle Celine on the passenger seat.

She went, clearly fatigued, her eyes drifting closed as he gazed at her beautiful face.

If they hadn't had an audience, he would have kissed her gently on the forehead, but he couldn't.

It wasn't his right. Not yet. Maybe not ever.

But the impulse was there. He cared for this brave woman and hurt for all the trauma she'd suffered.

She'd been shot, for heaven's sake! But she seemed to be handling it well.

Zeke dared to caress her cheek just once before stepping back and letting her go.

She would be in good hands with her grandfather, though Zeke wished he could hold her all night while she slept, just to be certain she was okay.

Unfortunately, he couldn't. But there were other things he could do to help her, even while she recovered elsewhere.

He stepped back from the vehicle and turned to find the master chief watching him carefully. The older man stepped up and offered his hand, which Zeke took for a firm shake.

"Thank you for diving in after her," Santini said, his voice gruff, as usual.

"You did good work tonight, son, and I'm grateful for every bit of it, but especially for your skills in the water which meant my baby girl didn't drown out there in the dark.

As you saw, silver is no laughing matter for any of us, but at least the soldiers are trained, somewhat, to handle it. "

"I'm just glad I found her," Zeke said, releasing the older man's hand. Relief flooded him as thoughts of all that could have happened zipped through his brain before he could shut down that avenue of thought.

“So am I,” Santini agreed, clearly relieved. “Don’t worry. We’ll keep watch over her, and she’ll probably be back on her feet in a day or two. Come over with the doc in the morning to visit, if you like.”

Now that was a big concession, and Zeke knew it. The master chief was giving him an invitation to visit Celine, which wasn’t something given lightly.

Zeke straightened and nodded. “Thank you, sir. I’ll be there.”

The master chief drove away with Celine a moment later, leaving Zeke standing with Rick as the Jeep pulled out of the small parking area.

He felt a little bereft, watching the tail lights of the vehicle as she was whisked away.

Rick put a hand on his shoulder, and Zeke shook himself. There was work to do.

“I want to read that bullet,” he ground out, determination filling him as he turned to his friend.

“I think that’s a good idea.”

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Celine felt awful as her grandfather helped her into the barracks set aside for Kinkaid-affiliated shifter soldiers.

Other shifter groups had places in other buildings spread around the island, maximizing the coverage and splitting the risk should the island base be attacked.

The building she lived in was the largest of the bunch, since there were a lot of Kinkaid and those loyal to the Kinkaid Clan serving here.

It was also the building where all the support staff lived, though most of them were also in the service.

She was the outlier, being a civilian, but they'd accepted her readily, and she'd made friends here.

She also had a lot of distant relations living in the building.

Kinkaid selkies and lions, along with other species whose home Packs or Clans had sworn allegiance to the Kinkaid Alpha.

She had a comfortable room that she'd made her own over the months that she'd been living here, but it was still a small room with just the basics.

A bed. A closet for her clothes. Bookshelves and a desk.

A comfy chair and a television, which was a concession for her being a civilian.

The soldiers didn't have individual TVs in their rooms. Instead, they shared a communal recreation room at the end of the hall, which she supposed was sort of like the main hall in a Pack house.

It was a gathering place where the shifters could play card games or watch movies or sports on a big screen TV in their free time.

That was something the wolf shifters on the island had started, recreating the finer points of Pack life to some small extent.

The lions and selkies and assorted others on the base had liked it and joined in, even though wolves, as a species, went a lot more for togetherness than most of the others.

She couldn't handle the rec room right now, though. She felt horrible and just wanted to get in bed. She had to clean up first, though. She might have just enough strength for that, at least.

Gramps helped her to the large ladies room and got one of her female cousins to help her out of her wet, bloody clothes and into a night shirt he'd fetched from her bedroom for her.

Dara was a lioness who worked directly for Lester Kinkaid, the base commander, as his assistant.

She kept his office running smoothly and knew everyone on the island, but she was also a distant cousin.

Celine found her comfortable and was glad to have her help in her weakened state.

"I really want to shower, but I don't think I have the energy right now," Celine admitted as she shrugged into her sleep shirt with Dara's help.

“I had a run-in with silver poisoning once when I was a little girl. I’m amazed you’re even awake right now,” Dara said with admiration in her tone that surprised Celine.

Dara might be in an administrative role right now, but she was a trained soldier, and as a lioness, she was deadly. Dara’s approval felt almost unreal to Celine, and it gave her the little boost she really needed right now. Today had been a doozy, both emotionally and physically.

“Well, it doesn’t feel great, but that human doctor fixed me right up. Got all the silver out, and now, I’m just dealing with the residual weakness. Or so he said.” Celine stood with Dara’s help.

“I believe it.” Dara still sounded impressed.

“And for a human guy, that doctor is a total hottie,” she went on, fanning herself comically.

“If he weren’t taken, a lot of us gals would be sniffing after him.

In fact, I know a couple of my friends have sampled some of the other guys in that unit and given them high marks in the stamina department.

They might be human, but they’ve definitely got the right stuff.

” She giggled, and Celine just shook her head. Then, a thought occurred.

“Has anybody talked about Zeke?” she asked before she could stop the words tumbling out of her mouth.

“Ezekiel Miller? He’s one of the quiet ones, though they’re all pretty taciturn, actually,” Dara observed, her head tilting as she seemed to think about Celine’s

question.

“No. I don’t think he’s taken the bait anybody’s been throwing down.

Pity. I’ve watched those men run along the beach, and there’s not a one of them that doesn’t rev my engine.

Or maybe I just really need to find a partner to work off some of my frustration.

I’ve pretty much given up on finding Mr. Right, and at this point, I’m just looking for Mr. Right Now.

” She chuckled sadly as she helped Celine to the door of the big bathroom.

“Sad, huh? And I thought for sure when I was little that I’d find my true mate and live happily ever after. ”

Celine sighed. “So did I. I think we all live in hope of that happening, but it’s become a bit of a fairytale, you know?”

“I do, indeed,” Dara agreed wistfully.

They went out into the hallway, and Gramps was there, ready to assist. He took one look at Celine and scooped her into his brawny arms, the way he’d done when she was still a child.

She snuggled into him, reassured by his strong presence.

He was her last link to her immediate family.

The beloved grandfather who had always been there for her, through good times and

bad.

She loved him so dearly, it was easy to let him take over and help her. At least, for now.

Tomorrow, when she felt stronger, she would reclaim her independence, and then, she'd find a way to thank that handsome human soldier who had risked his life to save hers.

She felt warm just thinking about him...and a little possessive.

She didn't want to really examine how relieved she'd felt to learn that none of the other women on the island had managed to snare his attention.

No, she wanted his focus all to herself.

She wasn't entirely certain what she was going to do with it once she had it, but she'd cross that bridge when she came to it. Dara stayed to open the door to Celine's room so Gramps could carry her inside, then left with a cheery wave and a promise to check on her later.

Celine's grandfather set her on her bed and made sure she had a big bottle of water, her cell phone, and the remote control for the television within easy reach on the night stand, then he kissed her on the forehead and stroked her hair.

He gazed at her with a soft expression on his usually stern face that reminded her of her childhood and the way this gruff man had always softened when it came to talking to her.

He was such a good man, and she loved him so much.

“I’m sorry I scared you today. My instinct was to swim when I got hurt, but it was a stupid move. I realized that almost immediately when I tried to shift and couldn’t,” she admitted.

“Sometimes, it’s hard to fight our instincts.

If that bullet had been a normal one, what you did could have worked out all right.

But trained soldiers know that there’s safety in numbers, and you’ll notice that none of the others left the boat when the bullets started flying.

I don’t expect you to have known that, but you’re here, with us, now.

You should probably try to learn a bit more about how we operate as a team.

When you’re feeling better in a day or two, I think you should probably join the squad for PT in the mornings, at the very least. What do you think? ”

All in all, she figured Gramps was going easy on her.

He probably should have been yelling at her about abandoning ship.

At the very least, he could have been giving her a stern talking to about stupidly following instinct when her brain should have been assessing her chances of survival more coherently.

The simple truth was, she’d panicked when she’d been shot.

Her inner beast had been clamoring for her to jump into the water.

Into the environment the seal functioned best in.

It hadn't been a rational decision on her part, and she knew better than that.

All her life, her elders had tried to make her examine situations critically and use both parts of her mind to evaluate the best course of action.

Today, she'd failed at that in a big way, and had almost paid the ultimate price.

And here was her grandfather, being the big teddy bear he was only with her, and offering her a gentle reproach and a suggested course of corrective action.

He was being so kind, it touched her deeply, and he did have a very good point.

"I will," she promised.

"Good girl," he approved, bending to kiss her hair, then rose to his full height.

"Dara will check on you, and I'll have food brought over from the kitchen for you.

When you start feeling better, you'll need to refuel.

I'll send a cooler with sandwiches, drinks and some treats.

Eat whenever you feel up to it. It'll help you heal.

I'll also come back later and see how you're doing, and someone will be checking on you throughout the night.

You have your phone, and you can call me anytime, okay? "

"I'll call if I need anything, but really, I'm just going to sleep for a good long time."
She snuggled into her blankets, pulling them up to her chin as she got comfortable.

Her grandfather nodded, smiling gently.

“You do that, pumpkin. I’ll see you later. Call me if you need me.” And with that, he left her.

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As Celine sank into exhausted sleep, her thoughts were on what she would do when she was better.

She'd already agreed to join the shifter soldiers for a workout in the mornings before she had to be at work in the kitchen, but she had even more on her mind than just physical training.

She wanted to learn about how soldiers worked together in the field.

She wasn't sure any of the shifter troops would have the time, or even the patience, to explain things to her, but she had a feeling she knew who might.

Zeke might just be willing to teach her a few things, and it was a really good excuse to spend time with him.

She wasn't sure what her grandfather might think if Zeke agreed, but then again, her personal time was hers to do with as she pleased.

And what pleased her right now was to spend time with Zeke—if he wanted to do the same.

Once she was feeling better, she'd scrounge up the courage and ask him.

After the way he'd been with her recently, she had a sneaking suspicion that he'd say yes.

That delicious thought in mind, she fell asleep to dream of the tall, handsome, strong

soldier who had quite literally saved her life.

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“Good work out there today.” Captain Haliwell slapped a folder on the conference table as he entered the room where they were going to discuss the morning’s mission to Celine’s house.

Zeke had showered and changed into a clean uniform after leaving Celine in her grandfather’s care, and had reported, as ordered, to discuss the events of the morning.

He had a lot on his mind and really wanted to talk to Lynn about the magical stuff he’d encountered.

She was already sitting at the table, next to Rick.

They’d been talking quietly when Zeke had entered the room a moment ago, and he’d merely nodded to them both before taking his seat.

Now that the captain had arrived, the debrief could get underway.

Zeke was looking forward to it. He wanted to learn all he could about what he’d found when he’d touched that lamp.

He didn’t want to be taken by surprise like that ever again.

“Thank you, sir,” Zeke said in response to Hal’s complimentary greeting as the captain waved him back to his seat.

“Now, how about we go through exactly what happened, step by step?” Hal suggested, a pad and pen in front of him should he wish to take notes.

Zeke walked them through what he'd done and what he'd seen in greater detail than he'd been able to do in the field.

For one thing, he didn't have to censor his words so as not to hurt Celine by exposing exactly how brutal the attack on her parents had been.

He laid it all out in detail as he'd seen it through the echoes of time that came to him when he'd touched various objects in the place.

Rick was interested in the strength and effect of the touch and the objects, trying to get a better grip on Zeke's talent.

Lynn was focused on the mage and the magic that might've been used in the attack.

Hal was taking a big picture approach, wanting to know the overall landscape of what Zeke could do and how it could benefit the unit in the future, and also how it could help in the ongoing investigation led by the shifters on the island.

Hal, Zeke knew, wanted to prove to the shifters that the human soldiers could contribute and make a difference, even if they didn't share their souls with an animal spirit.

Apparently, Zeke's little ability was helping in that direction, which was kind of shocking.

Zeke would've thought one of the other guys—with a more obviously beneficial ability—would have been of more assistance to the shifters.

Wil's ability to control the weather was an obvious thing.

He could direct storms wherever he wanted them to go, which seemed pretty damned

useful to Zeke.

But somehow, Zeke's little parlor trick of being able to read objects, had come in handier.

At least for right now. He was glad to be of service.

He just wished—as he had so many times before—that he had a bigger, badder superpower to contribute.

Shrugging inwardly, Zeke went on with his chronological account of everything he'd encountered on the mainland. He was up to his time spent among the trees and was trying to explain how it felt to read a tree when Lynn made an interesting contribution.

“Granny knows some dryads, I think. I'll give her a call and see if we can get one of them to speak with us more about trees and how they see the world.

What you're describing, Zeke, sounds a bit like what they do, only I think you're connecting with the tree as an object in the landscape, not a living creature of the forest,” Lynn said, making notes on the paper in front of her.

“Dryads? We're talking about wood nymphs? People who can communicate with trees? I thought they were mythological,” Hal put in.

“As with most myths, there is a kernel of truth in the old stories. After all, selkies are the stuff of Celtic legend, yet we have a number of them living here on this island. Who's to say that dryads don't exist in the real world?

I know, for a fact, that they do. As do water sprites, zephyrs, and other elemental powers.

Dryads communicate with growing things. Trees and plants, mostly.

I've never spoken with one myself, but Granny has a pretty extensive network and knows they've been making a resurgence in recent days.

I'll ask her to help us get in touch, if possible.

I think it would help define your abilities, Zeke, if we could compare how you read trees and plants with a dryad's experience of the same kinds of things.

But it's not an urgent need. Just something to add to the evaluation process as we discover more about your gift," Lynn concluded.

Zeke went on with his report, explaining the rest of the action until he got to the lamp. That fucking lamp. It had zapped him and beguiled him as well. He'd felt it pull him in, and it had nearly trapped him...somehow.

"There was some kind of magical spell, or something, on the lamp," Zeke told them, settling his gaze on Lynn. She didn't disappoint.

"It was a sentinel of some kind," she said, the word sounding right, though strange to Zeke's ears.

"Sentinel?" Rick asked, picking up on the word. Lynn turned to him and began to explain.

"It's a kind of spell some mages can set that turns an inanimate object into a sort of spy device.

How it works and how strong it is depends on the mage who sets the sentinel spell.

We already can surmise that the mage who murdered two adult shifters in their own home has got to be pretty powerful and that she dabbles in blood magic, dark magic, and the like.

To put it succinctly—evil. I think the lamp was a sentinel, set by the mage to alert her if anybody returned to the house,” Lynn concluded.

“It did more than that. Somehow...I connected with her through it. Very briefly, but it was enough to scare the bejeezus out of me,” Zeke told them all.

“Seriously?” Rick was clearly surprised by Zeke’s claim, his eyes wide and tone shocked.

“What do you mean, you connected ?” Hal asked more slowly.

“She saw me,” Zeke replied immediately. “And I saw her.”

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“No way,” Lynn breathed. Zeke turned his attention to the only person in the room with a lifelong knowledge of magic.

“There was a flash of sort of shocked awareness when she saw me looking back at her, then she tried to zap me, but I let go of the lamp, and all she did was singe my fingers a little,” Zeke informed her.

“That’s amazing,” Lynn went on, clearly impressed.

“When you say you saw her, do you mean you know what she looks like now? You saw her face?” Hal pressed.

Zeke nodded. “I can draw her. In fact, I’ve already started a sketch.” Zeke pulled out the paper he’d been working on before he’d come to this meeting. He hadn’t had much time, but he’d already roughed out the shape of her face.

“So, if you know what she looks like, does that mean she also saw you? Does she know what you look like?” Rick intoned.

“And does she have the kind of connections that would allow her to learn your true identity from knowing your facial features?” Hal added.

“Connections wouldn’t necessarily matter. She could scry for you, depending on her strength and abilities. Or if she has friends and allies with the right skills,” Lynn put in.

“So, we’re one step closer to her, knowing what she looks like now, but she’s also a

little closer to us, with the same kind of information.” Hal’s expression turned grim.

“This is personal now,” Lynn confirmed. “She’ll be gunning for you, in particular, Zeke. Now that she knows your face. It probably won’t be long until she also knows your identity, whether by magical or mundane means, and your location.”

“Then we’d better find out who she is first, and end her,” Hal said into the momentary silence after Lynn’s words.

Hal’s tone was that of the steadfast leader he was and brooked no argument.

Not that Zeke felt like arguing. He wanted that mage to pay for her crimes against Celine.

Zeke didn’t mind in the least putting himself in the line of fire if it would take the evil woman’s focus off Celine, even momentarily.

“I’m going to talk to Granny about finding someone to put wards on this island.

It’s probably too late to make a difference in this situation, but with some magical protections on this place, we might be able to stop any other mages from scrying the locations of who’s here and who’s not. ” Lynn looked thoughtful as she spoke.

“You’ll have to clear that with the base commander,” Hal told her, but Lynn nodded readily.

“I’ll talk to him. I’m actually a bit surprised the shifters didn’t already think of it, but then again, they might be hesitant to call on magical help since before recent times, there wasn’t much interaction between the various parts of the magical community.

Bloodletters, shifters, mages and the rest all kept pretty much to themselves, but all

that's changed now with the threat of Elspeth's return.

Alliances are forming, like they did in the Dark Ages, when we fought her last," Lynn explained.

Zeke was fascinated by the history and would make a point to get more of it from Lynn the next time they had a few moments for conversation. As it was right now, there was work to do and bad guys to catch. There was also a bullet to examine.

"Do you have the bullet that hit Celine?" Zeke asked, unwilling to wait any longer for the rest of them to get around to it. He wanted to see what he could learn from that insulting piece of silver.

Rick dug a small plastic bag out of his pocket and slid it across the table toward Zeke.

The slug within gleamed silver in the light of the conference room.

Such a small thing to cause so much pain.

And the idea of it being made out of silver to cause poisoning and unconsciousness that could easily have led to Celine's death made it even more sinister.

"I rinsed it off while I was wearing gloves, so hopefully I didn't leave any lingering impressions on it," Rick explained as Zeke opened the bag and spilled the hunk of silver out onto the table.

Reaching out with one finger, Zeke touched it, opening his mind to whatever he might be able to see from it.

There was the retrieval as it was dug out of Celine's flesh, then the scene reversed to where it was shot into her, then farther back to where it was loaded into the magazine

that was then loaded into the weapon from which it had been shot.

“I see the man who loaded the magazine. They were all silver bullets in that mag. Two men were sitting in a small room, loading the mags, talking about taking out shifters and how much fun it was to watch them scream as silver poisoned the wounds,” Zeke reported, almost snarling in disgust and hatred for the scumbags only he could see in his mind’s eye.

“Lovely fellows,” Lynn mused dryly.

“Ugly,” Zeke corrected. “I can see their faces. I’ll sketch them next.

They look like soldiers for hire, though they are also talking about being double agents.

Like they have a secret job where they shoot shifters, but otherwise present a more benevolent face to some other group that thinks they’re just watching and reporting. ”

“Could be Altor Custodis moles,” Lynn said contemplatively.

“That’s the group of watchers, right? Just as ancient an order as the Venifucus , but they’re supposed to be non-violent,” Hal mused.

“Supposed to be, but in recent years, there has been strong evidence that the Altor Custodis has been infiltrated in many places by Venifucus agents, using their extensive records to target shifters, bloodletters and those who would probably be on our side in the fight against evil. They’ve done a lot of damage,” Lynn confirmed.

“Then, it’s good Zeke can see and sketch their faces. We might get a hit on facial recognition and be able to identify them. Stop them, if possible,” Rick put in, his voice going low and determined. Zeke felt the same. Those guys needed to be

stopped.

“The bullets were manufactured overseas and shipped here. I think they were made in Germany. Probably in one of Kettering’s operations,” Zeke went on.

“How do you know that?” Hal asked, making notes.

“I saw the Ramstein skyline again. Hell, they might even have been made in his castle. The view was similar. Same area, at least. He might have a munitions plant on the grounds or something,” Zeke told them.

“That makes sense. We know how he loves his weaponry, and if he was making special ammo, he’d probably want it nearby where he could get to it easily,” Rick ventured.

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It wasn’t until after dinner that the master chief sought out Zeke in the cafeteria.

They were all off duty, so Santini pulled out a chair at Zeke’s table and sat casually, though his questions were anything but.

The others who had shared the meal left quietly until it was just Santini and Zeke left at the table.

Both had cups of coffee to sip, along with extra plates of lemon meringue pie the master chief had brought with him.

Zeke was glad of the friendly gesture and took the pie gratefully.

Honestly, the mess in this building was far superior to any he’d suffered in his

military career.

That was due mostly to the leader of the crew, Master Chief Santini, Zeke knew.

He thanked the older man for the pie and dug in while Santini formulated his questions.

“Thank you for censoring what you told Celine at the house. And thank you again for diving in after her and bringing her to shore. You likely saved her life, though we had seals in the water searching for her. I’d like to think they would have found her in time, but I’m not altogether certain of that,” Santini said, tilting his head as he took a forkful of pie and chewed thoughtfully.

“I was glad to help,” Zeke said, a bit uncomfortable with all the gratitude.

They were both soldiers. They did this kind of thing for a living. The overabundant thanks were making him feel a bit self-conscious, if he was being honest.

After a moment, the master chief nodded and let the subject rest. Zeke breathed a sigh of relief.

“Now, I’d like to know more detail about what you saw of the attack,” Santini said, jumping right in for the information he was after.

Zeke lowered his fork and took a deep breath.

The details he’d seen of the attack weren’t pretty, and he still didn’t understand all the implications of the magic fight he’d witnessed through his gift, though he’d talked it over with Lynn earlier.

Still, he’d promised Santini he would give him all the details while protecting Celine

from the worst of the nightmare images he'd received.

Taking a deep breath, Zeke told him every last detail he could remember.

Just as he'd told Rick and Lynn, and a host of others in his unit, earlier during his previous debriefing sessions today.

Zeke tried to note the differences between the questions Santini asked and those that Lynn had asked. Lynn understood magic, and her grandmother was a powerful witch, but Santini had the shifter perspective, which was something new and intriguing. At least to Zeke and the rest of his unit.

"I wish you'd been at the earlier meetings today, Master Chief," Zeke told the man after another astute question relating to the way Celine's parents had reacted to each of the mage's attacks.

He focused more on the victims—which was understandable since they were his kin—while Lynn had focused on the mage.

But his perspective on the shifters and how they had reacted apparently told Santini a bit more about the kind of magic the mage had been wielding than Lynn had been able to ascertain.

At least, that's how it sounded to Zeke.

"Why?" Santini asked, sitting back to regard Zeke with a curious expression.

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“We need the shifter perspective. Lynn knows more about magic than any of us in the unit, but the questions you’re asking prove there’s another way to look at this which may be more useful in the long run.

I can only see what I see. Interpreting it is the hard part, especially since I’m new to this entire world of magic and shapeshifters,” Zeke explained.

Santini was nodding along with his words, his expression considering. “I see what you mean. If there’s a next time—and I hope there will be—I’ll petition to have one of us, if not myself, present to examine things from the shifter side,” he promised as Zeke nodded in thanks.

Zeke hated telling the man about the particulars of the attack on his family, but he was handling it well.

Zeke went through every step of the action as he had seen it, and the master chief listened to it all, his only reaction a tightening of his lips from time to time at some of the worst revelations.

Finally, the story was told, and Zeke sat back.

“I’m very sorry to have had to tell you all this,” Zeke said softly.

“Don’t be,” the master chief cut him off.

“You’ve given me pieces of a puzzle I never otherwise would have been able to find.

You've given my mind the peace of knowing exactly what happened to my son and daughter-in-law, and I consider it a gift.

Sure, it was tough to hear, and it's tough to know, but not knowing what happened has been worse, by far.

Now, at least, I have a clear picture, and even better, I know what I'm up against in tracking down that mage and making her pay.

"Santini's eyes were grim, and Zeke knew how the man felt. He felt the same thirst for justice.

"I'm all for that, Master Chief. If I can help in any way, please call on me," Zeke offered again.

"You've already been more help than anyone else," Santini offered with an approving nod. "That power of yours isn't trivial."

Zeke hesitated a moment before speaking.

The master chief made him feel safer to speak his mind than any of his comrades.

Maybe it was because they were in different chains of command.

Maybe it was because Santini knew a hell of a lot more about magic than any of his Green Beret unit mates.

Or, maybe, it was just that Santini was older and had seen a lot more of the world.

He had a strong mentor vibe that Zeke had seen at work in his command, as well as with many of the other younger soldiers on the base.

Zeke somehow felt safe talking this over with the older man, and it had been bugging him for a long time.

“I have to admit, I never thought anyone would say that, or think that. When that old djinn was giving out the gifts, I always felt like I got the consolation prize,” Zeke admitted.

“Because it’s not showy or more of an active physical power? Like Hal and his super-strength or your doctor friend who can heal with his touch?” Santini asked, nodding as if he already knew the answer.

Zeke nodded slowly in agreement. “It hasn’t been super useful to this point.

I’m just glad I’ve been able to help Celine, and you, sir.

But I want you to know, I’m still a special operator whose skills are going to waste sitting here on this patch of sand.

I want to get out there in the real world again and make a difference.

That’s what I signed on for, and that’s what we haven’t been able to do much in the past few months.

If you need an extra hand when you go to take out the mage, I want to be on the mission.

I’m volunteering, though I know it’s a bit unorthodox telling you this rather than my chain of command. I just wanted you to know.”

The master chief surprised him by reaching out one beefy hand and placing it on Zeke’s shoulder. He squeezed once, in what almost felt like affection. Paired with the

respect Zeke thought he saw in the older man's eyes, Zeke felt like he'd done and said the right thing.

"Nothing about this base is orthodox, youngster." Santini chuckled and let go of Zeke's shoulder.

"I'll keep your offer in mind, but you need to stop thinking of your gift as sub-par.

It's real and true and extremely helpful.

It may not be showy or outrageous, but it's solid and useful.

Just like you, I expect." Santini sat back in his chair and regarded Zeke appraisingly.

"I've seen your record, and I have to admit, you impress me, Zeke.

Even before your encounter with the djinn, your skills spoke for themselves, and I'd have been pleased to have you on my team, anytime. If you'd gone Navy, that is."

The master chief winked as he stood from the table. He bussed his own dishes, and Zeke followed suit. As they walked slowly over to the wall where the dirty dishes were stacked to be collected, Santini spoke again.

"Psychometry is a fascinating gift. I think you're the kind of man who will find good ways to use it now and into the future. This is just the first of many instances where your particular gift will come in handy, I believe."

"What makes you so sure?" Zeke had to ask. He didn't feel the same way at all, but if the master chief believed his own words, it was worth thinking about.

"My people believe in and serve the Goddess. We call Her the Mother of All. Did

you know that?” Santini asked, putting his dishes in the waiting tub and turning to look Zeke in the eye.

“I’d heard something like that from Lynn,” Zeke allowed.

“Well, I’ve heard there’s a saying among humans that God works in mysterious ways.

We believe the same about the Divine. Whether you think that’s a male deity or the Great Spirit or Gaia or the Mother of All.

She’ll never give you more than you can handle, and very often, She’ll surprise you with things you never expected.

I suspect your gift is something like that.

She gave it to you for a reason, Zeke. You just need to trust that She knows what She’s doing. ”

“So, you’re saying I should have faith?” Zeke asked, cringing just a little.

“That about sums it up. For now, just trust that you’re on the right path and follow where it leads.

A lot of shitty things have happened, but we have to trust that they’re happening for reasons only the Divine can truly comprehend.

In the eternal battle between good and evil, I know which side I want to be on.

The side of the Light. The Goddess. The Mother of All.

” Each declaration was spoken with such conviction, Zeke felt it down to his bones.

“I’ve never really been a religious man, but I like what you’re saying,” Zeke admitted to the older man.

“It’s not about organized religions. It’s about being on the right side when push comes to shove.

I believe all of you Army guys are on the straight and narrow, otherwise your unit wouldn’t have been allowed to set foot on this base.

And you wouldn’t have been given such incredible gifts by the djinn you encountered.

Those old ones are known to be capricious and fast to kill those they don’t like.

That one must’ve liked what he saw in all of you and chose to intervene on the side of Light by arming you all with gifts he chose especially for each one of you.

The fact that he gave you psychometry means something.

It’ll be up to you to figure out what that is and use it to the best of your ability.

Just like all your other friends. Each man in your unit is going to have to figure that out for themselves. ”

Zeke shook his head. “I hear you, Master Chief, and I appreciate your guidance. It’s just going to take a while for me to figure out what it all means. Before recent events, I really did think I’d gotten the lamest gift of all.”

“Far from it, youngster. Believe it. You might be the key to unlocking mysteries that

nobody else can discover. You've done it here. I think you'll continue to improve as you use your gift and uncover all its nuances. Don't give up on it."

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:43 pm

Early the next morning, Zeke and Rick made their way to Celine's quarters on the other side of the island. Rick walked quietly beside Zeke, his usual calm offset slightly by the faint line between his brows.

"Her people were checking on her through the night, right?" Zeke asked, more to reassure himself than anything.

Rick gave him a sidelong look. "They would've called me had she needed more help."

Zeke nodded, jaw tight. He still couldn't get the image out of his mind of her so weak and bleeding on the beach the day before. Seeing her like that had ignited something primal in him—panic, yes, but also a bone-deep need to protect her.

When they reached the barracks where Celine's room was located, the Navy shifters greeted them with nods and a few smiles. Slowly but surely, the Army guys were gaining acceptance and even a bit of respect on this mostly-Navy base.

A tall woman named Dara led them to Celine's door and waited while Rick took the lead, knocking politely.

Zeke stood back, trying not to let his anxiety show.

He expected she'd still be laid up in bed, but when the door opened, Celine was standing there barefoot, wrapped in a thick robe, her hair damp but combed back.

Her eyes were clearer than they'd been the day before, but fatigue lingered in the

corners.

“Morning,” she said, her voice a little rough, but a lot more energetic than Zeke had expected.

His chest eased at the sight of her standing upright, her eyes sharp. “Morning.”

Rick stepped forward, his expression softening. “Mind if I do a quick check to make sure I didn’t miss anything?”

Celine blinked, then nodded and stepped aside to let them in.

The small room was simple and clean, with a small touches that showed she was a civilian, not one of the military staff. She had a set of soft chairs in one corner, and she went there, motioning for Rick to take the other chair. Zeke stood off to one side, watching all.

Celine pulled her robe tighter around her, eyes widening.

Zeke tried not to hover or look like he wanted to wrap her in blankets and never let her leave his sight again while Rick sat beside her.

He held out his hands to her, and she took them both, allowing him the light touch. “This will just take a minute.”

Rick’s eyes closed, his expression going still.

Zeke knew the look—Rick wasn’t just scanning vitals.

He was reaching beneath the surface, checking for magical residue, trauma, internal strain.

At least, that's how Rick had explained his methods to Zeke.

He still wasn't sure about all the magical stuff, though they'd all been learning as fast as they could.

After a few moments, Rick opened his eyes and released her hands.

"You're clear," he said with a nod. "Mild bruising, a little magical interference lingering around your aura, but nothing dangerous. You can move around—light activity only for today. No heavy work. No swimming in the ocean either, though I suppose your other half wants to do just that."

Celine cracked a smile. "I'll try to behave."

Zeke let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. "Thanks, Doc."

"Yes, thank you," Celine echoed.

Rick stood, smiling gently at her. "You're very welcome. And a lot tougher than you look. I expected you to still be on bedrest today, but I guess I have a lot to learn about shifter constitution."

"We all heal pretty fast as long as there's no poison in our systems to mess with our natural magic. You took care of that already, and I can't thank you enough," Celine said, smiling gratefully at Rick.

"Just doing my job, ma'am," Rick replied gently. "I'll head back, now that I know you're all right, but don't hesitate to call me if you have any problems. Okay?"

"Will do, but I slept well, and I feel good. Raring to go, in fact," she told them both.

“Just don’t overdo it. Light activity only, like I said. Go take a stroll on the beach if you must get outside, but nothing more than that.”

“Yes, sir,” she joked, giving him a little salute that wasn’t anywhere near military precision. Rick smiled and headed for the door.

Zeke didn’t move. He wasn’t going anywhere until he’d had a chance to talk with her. Maybe he’d invite her on that stroll Rick had so helpfully suggested.

As the door to Celine’s room closed behind Rick, silence settled between Zeke and Celine. It wasn’t uncomfortable, just...aware.

Celine stood, the long robe shifting subtly around her legs as she moved to the single window in the room.

“The ocean’s calmer today,” she said softly.

Zeke joined her, watching the morning light ripple across the water. “Want to go for that walk? Just down the beach a bit. Slow pace. Like Rick ordered.”

She looked up at him, something unreadable in her eyes, then nodded. “Yeah. I’d like that.”

Ten minutes later, they walked side by side along the shoreline. The wet sand was firm underfoot, the breeze lifting Celine’s hair and tossing it gently across her shoulders.

Zeke kept his pace easy, matching her smaller strides. He didn’t push, didn’t ask questions. He was just enjoying being in her presence on this beautiful morning. The weather was fine, and everybody he cared about was safe for the moment.

“Thank you,” she said quietly, her voice nearly drowned by the waves. “For pulling me out.”

“I’d do it again in a heartbeat.” He hadn’t quite meant to say that. To be so transparent with his growing feelings. They were deeper than even he expected.

She stopped, turning to face him, her gaze meeting and holding his. It was as if she was searching for the meaning behind his words... Or maybe, something deeper...

“You didn’t even hesitate to jump in after me,” she said, like it was something remarkable.

Zeke stepped closer, his voice low. “There’s no universe in which I wouldn’t go after you when you were in trouble.”

She held his gaze for a long moment, then reached for his hand.

They walked on in silence, fingers entwined, the sound of the surf washing away the weight of the day before.

They walked along slowly like that for a while, fingers laced, the morning tide coming in along the shore a few feet away.

Celine didn’t say much, and Zeke didn’t rush her.

She was sorting through something. He could feel it in the way her grip would tighten briefly, then ease, as if waves were passing through her from the inside out.

When they reached a stretch of beach where the dunes rose behind them like sheltering arms, she slowed, then stopped entirely. Zeke followed her gaze as she looked out to the ocean. She wasn’t really looking at the water anymore.

“There’s a cove not too far from my childhood home,” she said quietly. “I used to swim there with my parents when I was little. It was our secret spot.”

Zeke said nothing, just waited.

She wrapped her arms around herself, suddenly seeming smaller despite the power he knew lived beneath her skin.

“I keep thinking about how they died. Not just the fact of it, but how sudden it was. How violent. One moment, they were alive, the next...” She shook her head. “It still doesn’t feel real sometimes. Like if I go back to the house, or swim to that cove, I’ll find them there. Waiting.”

Zeke moved closer, gently placing a hand at her back. She didn’t flinch, just leaned into the contact like she needed him to ground her in the here and now.

“They were murdered,” she whispered. “And I wasn’t there to even try to stop it. I don’t know if I’ll ever stop feeling guilty.”

Zeke’s voice was quiet, rough with emotion. “That’s not on you, babe. If you’d been there, you would have died too.”

“I know that in my head,” she said. “But my wild heart doesn’t always listen.”

He turned toward her then, resting one of his hands lightly against her cheek.

“Your survival is important, Celine. In fact, you’ve done more than survive.

You’ve held your ground in a world that doesn’t fight fair.

You’ve held onto hope. You’ve fought through the pain with the help of your family

and friends, and you've kept your heart open. ”

She blinked, and he could see the shimmer of unshed tears in her eyes, but she didn't let them fall.

“That's what draws me to you,” he added softly. “Not just your strength. Your beautiful, hopeful soul.”

“You mean that?” Celine exhaled, seeming a bit shaky.

“I wouldn't say it if I didn't mean it.”

She stepped into him then, her hands rising to rest against his chest. Zeke lowered his head slowly, giving her time to pull away.

She didn't.

Their lips met, and the world spun off its axis. At least, that's how it felt to Zeke. He loved the feel of her in his arms, especially after the fear of losing her light the night before. She was warm and soft under his hands, and she moved into his kiss, stroking his ego...and his desire.

He broke away to look deep into her eyes. “I almost lost you. Don't ever scare me like that again.”

“I'll do my best,” she promised with a light smile, then rose on her tiptoes to kiss him again.

He was helpless to resist, not that he ever wanted to turn down a kiss from the woman who was fast becoming his safe port in the storm of life. Their lips met again—warmer this time, deeper.

He was fully present in the moment, not caring who might see them or what others might think.

This was purely about him and her. Zeke and Celine.

Two beings discovering each other on this sliver of beach, halfway between the ocean and the land.

A place where a selkie and a human could meet on equal terms.

When they finally broke apart, Celine stayed close, her forehead resting against his chest.

“Things might not get easier from here. I still need to find justice for my parents,” she murmured.

“I know,” Zeke agreed softly. “And I’m going to help with that.

I’ve already spoken to your grandfather about helping.

And my unit wants to try to shut down Kettering’s operation in the long run, though we haven’t figured out exactly how we’re going to do that yet.

I’m just saying, there will be trials in our future, but whatever comes, I hope we can face it together. ”

She lifted her head to meet his gaze. “You already spoke to Gramps?”

“We had a little chat after dinner last night. He’s a good man, your grandfather,” Zeke observed.

“He’s the best,” Celine agreed. “I’m glad you two are getting along. He’s very important to me, Zeke. And... I think... I think you’re becoming important to me too.”

“Well, thank heaven for that,” Zeke muttered, grinning as he sealed her words with another kiss.

Gentler, this time, it was a kiss of gentle discovery, of souls meeting and agreeing to spending more time with each other to see where this deep attraction might lead.

Zeke couldn’t get enough of her, but they had time now.

They both were on the same page and that gave him more hope than he’d had before.

The waves rolled in nearby, creeping ever closer, but neither of them moved. The tide might shift, and storms might come, but right now, in this fragile slice of morning, they had each other.

And for the first time in a long time, that was enough.

*

Celine took things easy the rest of that day.

Zeke had to be on duty, so she didn’t see him again until the next morning, when she reported for her first shift back in the kitchen at his barracks building.

Zeke was at breakfast, and when she saw him in the serving line, and they managed to say a few words to each other, he told her he was off duty for the rest of the morning.

He also invited her for another walk along the shore, and she agreed, taking her long morning break with him. They walked down to the waterline and made their way around the curve of the island, heading away from the barracks building.

“We’ve got to stop meeting like this,” she quipped as they walked along the beach. “It seems all we ever do is stroll along the shore.”

“Well, I’d offer to take you out dancing, but while stuck on this island, our options are kind of limited.” He smiled at her, reaching for her hand now that they were out of sight of everyone else for the moment.

“That’s okay. I think walking along the beach is incredibly romantic. Both halves of my soul enjoy this setting. The beach is one of my favorite places ever,” she admitted, smiling over at him.

“Mine too.” He breathed deeply, holding her gaze. “Actually, anyplace you are is my favorite place ever.”

And just like that, the mood changed from playful to passionate...and sort of wondrous.

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“I know we’re in the middle of a situation with tracking down the mage.

And my unit has an ongoing mission to identify and take down those responsible for putting a price on our heads and forcing us into hiding.

But I can’t deny that I’m feeling things when I’m around you that I’ve never felt before.

Things that feel important, Celine. Do you know what I mean?

” Zeke turned to her, taking both of her hands in his and waiting for her answer, holding his breath and hoping for the best.

“I...” She trailed off, seeming to search for her voice. “I do know what you mean, Zeke. And I’m confused, and thrilled, and unsure what happens now. I mean... You’re not a shifter. I don’t know how it’s supposed to work between someone like me and, uh, someone like you.”

“I think we can make our own rules. At least for now, babe. Don’t you think?” He drew her closer and couldn’t wait any longer.

Zeke seized her lips with his, demanding the response he’d dreamed of from her.

The response she gave him easily. As if she was made to be right there, in his embrace.

The sand was warm and fluffy beneath them.

They weren't as close to the shore today.

No, he'd deliberately kept them clear of the water line so if things progressed, they could sit—or, even better, lay—on the sand without getting drenched.

He'd had the plan in mind when they'd begun this walk, but it was Celine, in the end, who dragged him down to the sand. Somehow, he ended up on his back with her perched over him, her legs straddling him as their kisses went on and on, only growing hotter the longer it went on.

“You make me feel alive again, Zeke,” she whispered, gazing down into his eyes.

He could see the fire in her gaze and feel the softness of her feminine form touching him in all the right places.

He hadn't counted on anything happening between them on this walk, though he'd hoped.

And as if in answer to his prayers, Celine had taken the reins and moved them forward.

He liked that. He liked that a lot, and he wasn't about to miss this opportunity.

“I like it when you look at me that way,” he replied as she leaned up, her core moving downward to press against his hard cock.

There might be layers of clothing between them, but he felt her touch like a rocket of joy up his spine.

Damn, she felt good. He put his hands on her waist, gripping lightly.

“What way?” she asked playfully.

“Like you want me to be inside you,” he whispered back, just as playfully.

She gasped, moving downward as his hands roamed upward on her torso. She brought her lips close to his as she whispered her answer.

“I do want that.” Then, she lowered her lips to his all the way, and for the first time, she initiated a kiss between them, and it was hotter than anything that had come before.

They kissed for long moments, a tempestuous joining of lips, mouths and tongues that stoked the fire between them higher.

Then, Zeke moved his hands into her hair, holding her closer as he rolled them on the soft, forgiving sand so that he was on top, her luscious body cradling his as she opened her legs, and her mouth, for him.

Her knees were on either side of his hips as he pressed down into her, learning the way their bodies fit together. Perfection.

She made a soft sound that made him move back to look at her. She wasn't in distress. Far from it. She used the opportunity to move her fingers to his shirt, unbuttoning the uniform blouse so she could get her hands under it, then moving to the waistband of his pants to tug his T-shirt free.

“I want to touch you,” she whispered. He felt himself grow harder with each touch and sound she made. This woman turned him on like no other.

“I want that too, babe. And I want to touch you, but we're in a public place. A patrol could come through at any time,” he reminded her.

For a moment, he thought he saw a spark of deviltry in her eyes, then she sighed heavily. Her fingers were under his T-shirt, stroking his abs. Damn, he liked her touch.

“I could say that makes this even more exciting, but for the fact that it would undoubtedly get back to Gramps, and while shifters aren’t generally prudes about sex, he is my grandfather.

” She rested her forehead against his chest for a moment.

“I’m not ready to go public just yet, but I do want to be with you, Zeke. ”

Her small voice thrilled him, but he needed to take this down a notch.

She was touching his bare skin, and as much as he wanted to do the same to her, he also wanted to respect her boundaries.

He wouldn’t do anything she didn’t want, and for now, she wanted to keep their relationship status private.

While on the one hand, he could feel a bit strange about that, he also felt a little cautious about letting his friends and comrades know about his feelings for Celine.

He wanted to keep this new thing between them private for a little while.

Maybe until she decided if they were going to be a long-term thing or not.

For his part, he already knew he wanted her in his life going forward.

It seemed strange, but he couldn’t quite picture his life from this point on, without her in it.

It was going to have to be up to her, though.

He was a human guy, even if he had been gifted with magic late in life.

He didn't have the same mating requirements as shifters did.

The ball was in her court. If she thought he was her mate, then he wasn't going to argue.

He'd happily take her to wife and live the rest of his days happy. However long that happened to be.

But he wasn't going to pressure her. He wouldn't try to hold her if she really didn't want him.

He felt strongly about that. As strongly as he felt about her.

He wouldn't tie her down. She was a free spirit, and if she chose to spend her life with him, he would count himself the luckiest son of a bitch alive.

But he was getting way ahead of himself.

Right now, he had to figure out how to arrange a rendezvous so they could both get what they wanted without anyone else being the wiser.

And in light of that last requirement, he pulled back, sitting beside her on the sand for a moment so they could both catch their breath.

"Do you have a private room in your barracks?" she asked a bit breathlessly.

"Yeah. Why?" Zeke's head was still spinning as he looked over at her.

She shrugged, but it didn't look quite as casual as her words sounded.

"Maybe it's something about almost dying yesterday, but I really want to finish what we've started, Zeke, and we can't do that in my dorm.

Damn lions can hear a pin drop at fifty yards.

I'd never get away with smuggling you into my room for the night, but I might be able to sneak out and come to you. "

He sucked in a breath. It was as if the Tooth Fairy, Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny had all decided to grant him his fondest wish at once. How could he say no to that?

"My room is private, and you know we regular folk don't hear as well as you shifters. Once you're in my room, nobody will have anything to say about it. But I wouldn't want to get you in trouble, and I definitely don't want to cross your grandfather in any way. Are you sure about this?"

She had the audacity to chuckle as she rose to her feet. He followed suit and couldn't resist when she turned to him and patted his chest. His arms looped casually around her waist, and he did his best not to draw her even closer.

"Most shifters don't take relationships very seriously unless it's with their perfect mate. Then, nothing can keep them apart, and there's no question of being with anyone else, ever. Has anyone explained about mating among shifters?"

"Yeah, it was part of the briefing," Zeke admitted, frowning a bit.

"But how does that apply with us? I mean, what if I want something more serious, but you're not feeling the mate vibes or whatever?"

How would that work?" He really wanted to know her take on this and was grateful, in a way, that she had brought it up.

She sighed, smoothing her hand over his heart.

"Remember all those old tales about selkies breaking the hearts of their human lovers? That's probably the result of that kind of thing, but in our case...

" She licked her lips and placed a small kiss against the corner of his mouth.

"I don't think we have to worry too much.

I'm drawn to you, Zeke. Have been since I first saw you.

And I think you feel the same. All we need now is time to establish whether or not we're mates in the fullest sense of the word.

If we are, then nobody will object to our being together.

Especially not Gramps. If we're not, then I think we'll both enjoy our time together and part as friends when it's time to move on.

At least, that's how it'll be for me." Her face contorted in a small frown.

"I'm not sure about how it would go for you.

I'd hate to break your heart. I mean, I don't think I will, but according to those old legends, it is a risk.

The question is, are you willing to take it? "

She was laying it all on the line, he thought. His courageous, beautiful girl was tempting him with her honesty. He really liked that about her, and he wanted to give it right back to her. He took a deep breath.

“And what if we belong together?” he barely whispered. “What if we’re true mates?”

A beatific smile broke over her lips as she grinned up at him. “Then you’ll be mine, and I’ll be yours. Forever.”

Zeke wasn’t sure he’d really considered joining his life to a woman before, though he had to admit to admiring the relationships he’d seen blossom between some of his teammates and their ladies.

It was a lonely life, being single, especially when they’d all been sidelined to this base for the foreseeable future. But mating? Marriage? Forever?

He found the concept didn’t scare him as much as it once had.

In fact, if he was downright giddy, contemplating forever with Celine.

The prospect held no fear at all. Only an eager sort of anticipation.

He found himself rooting for them to find that special magic together that meant they were mates.

It didn’t take courage at all, in the end.

Just a willingness to give his heart and hope and pray she’d give hers in return.

He’d do that. Starting tonight.

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Later that night, after everyone but those assigned to night patrol had gone to bed, Zeke met up with Celine, just outside the barracks building.

“This is ridiculous,” Celine whispered as she crouched beside him in the narrow space between the side of the building and a large shrub.

Zeke grinned in the dark. “You’re the one who didn’t want to be seen.”

“Because I’m not ready to be the talk of the island,” she shot back, though her eyes sparkled with amusement.

“Then keep your voice down, babe,” he murmured, lips brushing her ear. “We’re almost there.”

She rolled her eyes but followed as he motioned her around the side door. The hallway beyond was dimly lit and quiet—but not empty. He could hear footsteps near the stairwell. Probably one of his buddies on night patrol.

Zeke held up a hand to signal stillness, then peeked around the corner. Sure enough, there was his friend Dan, heading toward the exit. The guy moved like a ghost, but Zeke knew the rhythm of his steps. Timing would be everything.

He turned back to Celine. She was pressed against the wall, eyes wide, one hand clamped over her mouth to keep from laughing.

He felt the chuckle rising in his own chest and barely swallowed it down. Instead, he reached for her hand, interlacing their fingers, and waited. As soon as Dan’s footsteps faded toward the back door, Zeke pulled her gently down the hall.

“Now,” he whispered.

They made it up the stairs without incident, both of them holding their breath, bodies close. At the top, she stumbled slightly, and he caught her with a soft grunt, her weight falling briefly against his chest.

“Shhh,” she whispered, breathless and grinning as she looked up at him.

He grinned back, heart thudding in his chest for reasons that had nothing to do with being caught. “My room’s the third door on the left,” he murmured.

Celine nodded, and together, they tiptoed past the other bedrooms, one door cracked open with soft snoring coming from within. Another had a faint glow behind it—probably one of the guys watching a late movie. Zeke moved faster.

They reached his door, and he opened it with a soft click .

As soon as they stepped inside and he closed it behind them, the tension snapped like a rubber band.

Both of them burst into quiet giggles, shoulders shaking, hands over mouths like they were teenagers sneaking in past curfew.

Zeke leaned back against the door, breathless with adrenaline and amusement.

“We’re terrible at this.”

Celine was still laughing softly as she stepped farther into the room, glancing around.

“So. This is your lair.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Disappointed?”

“Not at all.” She turned back to him, her expression shifting from playful to warm. “It feels like you.”

Zeke crossed the room slowly, heart kicking into a new rhythm. She stood still, waiting, her eyes locked on his.

When he reached her, she slid into his arms like she belonged there. No hesitation. No tension. Just trust. Man, he liked that.

He cupped the back of her head and brought his lips to hers—no longer sneaking, no longer hiding.

This kiss was slow and deep. It was the kind of kiss that unraveled him from the inside out.

She melted against him, her hands fisting in his shirt as she kissed him back with quiet intensity.

When they finally pulled apart, her breath was unsteady, and her voice was barely audible.

“This was totally worth the risk.” She chuckled low, leaning into his embrace.

“Not yet, but it will be. I promise.” His gaze held hers, and the fire of desire leapt between them.

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Celine could hardly catch her breath. Zeke held her while his mouth seduced hers, lulling her into a state of buzzing awareness. Of desire. Of need.

He moved with her in his arms, toward the bed.

He placed her down on the bed and relieved her of her shirt and pants, leaving her in only her bra and panties, kissing every inch of skin as he revealed it, making her squirm with delight and rising intensity.

Then, he pulled his own clothing off as he rose above her momentarily.

Cupping her breast, he paused to meet her gaze.

Hot, molten lava coursed through her veins at his smoldering look.

He spoke not a word, but his intent was clear.

He was seeking permission. Gauging her readiness and reaction.

Then, when he seemed to judge her ready, he very deliberately pushed her bra away, dipping his head to suck her nipple into his hot mouth.

She would have moaned if she wasn't trying really hard to be quiet. Humans might not have the superior hearing of shifters, but she couldn't exactly scream the place down without attracting attention.

She arched against him as he continued to suck greedily, working her into a peak, his

thumb and forefinger working the other side.

She was writhing on the bed before he finally moved away from her breasts, running both of his hands down her sides, then tracing the line of her panties.

He hooked a finger into each side, pulling downward with her enthusiastic encouragement.

“I’ve wanted to do this for a long time,” Zeke said, his low growl touching an answering note deep within her wild heart.

She spread her legs for him, unable to resist and ready for more. He stooped, lifting her higher up the bed, and then lowered himself to kneel between her thighs. Holding her gaze, he lowered his mouth to her core, and she nearly exploded right then and there.

He licked her as she bucked into him. She did her best not to gasp as he slid one thick finger inside her. It had been a long time since she’d been with anyone, but she didn’t feel self-conscious as Zeke paid her such delicious attention.

She tangled her hands in his hair as he added another finger, pulsing in and out as he tongued her little nubbin in rhythm with his seeking fingers. She was so close, but she didn’t want to come just yet. No. She wanted him inside her for that. No more waiting.

Abruptly, Zeke rose, his eyes a little wild as he stripped off his briefs. His cock was a thing of beauty. Thick and long, she wanted it—all of him—badly.

“I can’t wait any longer, babe. Are you ready for me?” Zeke asked, reaching for his bedside table. He pulled a condom out of the top drawer and sheathed himself as she watched in mute appreciation.

Shifters didn't carry or catch diseases from sex, and the chances of getting pregnant by someone who wasn't a true mate were slim to none.

Still, she took it as a sign of his care for her that he thought to sheathe himself for their encounter.

They'd have time to talk about it later and make more rational decisions.

Right now, she just wanted the friction of that big dick inside her, any way she could get it.

"This might be fast. It's been a while for me," he said, moving down over her, his breathing unsteady as he rejoined her and reclaimed his space between her legs.

"For me too," she admitted.

Their eyes met and held for a moment, saying so much without uttering a word. He bent to kiss again her as he pushed inward, joining their bodies for the first time.

"Fuck," Zeke groaned against her lips in a low tone, turning her on even more as he pressed another inch into her waiting body.

He worked his hips until he was seated fully within her, and she could only whimper, conscious of keeping quiet.

"That feels so good," he mumbled against her skin as he pressed open-mouthed kisses against her neck and shoulder.

His thickness stretched her in the most delicious way, and his biceps bulged as he held himself over her. Missionary wasn't her preferred position, usually, but this man brought new meaning to everything they did. His strength and protective streak made

her feel cherished...even...loved?

She wouldn't get too far ahead of herself just yet. For now, they had this amazing connection. Sex had never been so good for her, and they'd only just gotten started. She couldn't wait to feel what came next.

He stilled, as if savoring the moment, just as she was doing, but she couldn't help her body tightening around him. She wanted more. She started moving her hips underneath him, wanting to entice him. Please him. Give him pleasure too.

Heat poured off him, his scent delighting her senses as they began to move together, each seeking to please the other in a dance as old as time and deep as the ocean. She wanted it to go on forever, but she also wanted to chase the ecstasy she knew was waiting at the end of this particular journey.

She almost yelped in distress when he moved away, disengaging so he could flip her over and position her on her knees, ass up in the air.

She almost growled, liking the way he handled her, as if her pleasure was his to command.

And perhaps...it was. Somehow, she found she liked the thought of that too.

He slapped her ass, just once, making her squirm in delight.

Damn. She'd never liked that sort of thing before, but with Zeke, she was quickly discovering, all things were new and wonderful.

She could feel him moving closer behind her, and then, he rejoined their bodies, sliding home in one bold move that made her breath catch.

Sweet Mother of All, that was deep and delicious.

The friction and size of him made the entry both surprising and scintillating.

Her desire shot up again, and with just a few bold strokes of his big cock, she was coming hard, shouting her release into the pillow, to muffle the sounds she couldn't contain.

In the shadow of reason, she felt him stiffen inside her, and she vaguely realized he had found pleasure with her.

Somehow, that made it even more satisfying, she thought, just a moment before she closed her eyes and did her best to recover from the best orgasm of her entire life.

Celine woke, only realizing she must have passed out—or fallen asleep—after that momentous climax Zeke had given her.

She was in his bed now, spooned against him, her back to his chest as he breathed deeply in sleep.

She'd never been more comfortable sharing a bed with anyone.

Seriously, everything with Zeke was better than she'd ever had before.

The thought made wonder spark in her blood. Could he be her destined mate?

A human. A soldier. A man of magic who hadn't been raised with it.

He was new to so much that she took for granted in her life, but he was willing to learn, and he brought with him all his experience as a protector of those who could not protect themselves from the threat of violence and evil throughout the world.

He'd seen things. No doubt, he'd done a lot of things too.

He was a man of the world, whereas she'd been a homebody until recently, never leaving the comfort and safety of her parents' home.

She'd spent a lot of time in her home waters, never really traveling much.

Even now, she hadn't gone all that far from home, though that was more from luck than anything else.

She'd been taken in by her grandfather after the murder of her parents, and she would have willingly gone wherever he'd been stationed, but he'd arranged to be on this base, close to her childhood home.

He'd probably chosen this assignment in order to be close enough to do his own investigation.

He'd also probably thought about her comfort and didn't want to uproot her too severely in her time of grief.

She also knew that his new job as chief in charge of the kitchen wasn't his usual sort of posting.

No, Gramps was a Navy SEAL, who was usually right in the thick of the action, but he'd taken a step back to look after her in her time of need.

Goddess, how she loved him. He'd been so good to her this past year, uprooting his whole life, and even his career, for her. He was such a good man, and a great grandfather.

The man who held her in his arms shared some of those same qualities, though he

wasn't a shifter.

Zeke served in the Army's Special Forces and had that same backbone of strength and will that she'd noticed a lot of those Special Operators had.

Before meeting him and his unit, she'd thought that was peculiar to the shifter soldiers, but it wasn't.

There were humans with the same grit, determination and honor.

She'd been pleasantly surprised by that discovery.

In her old life, she hadn't mixed with humans much, except in casual ways, and she'd never met any human soldiers.

Especially not Special Forces soldiers. Meeting the men of Zeke's unit had been an eye-opener, in a good way.

They were men of honor that she had quickly come to respect, and they were willing to help her find answers in the deaths of her parents. That was big.

Cross-species assistance wasn't the norm, but the humans seemed to take it as a matter of course. She needed help. They could give it. Therefore, they did. No questions asked.

Things didn't always work that way in the magical world.

She had found a new respect for the willingness of these humans to fight on the side of Light, no matter who was asking.

She'd talked it over with her grandfather when she'd first started working in the

kitchen and observing the men who lived in the building.

He'd shared his observations with her and the fact that he had more than a few human friends and colleagues that he would count on to have his back in any life-or-death situation.

She hadn't known that before, and it made her look at non-magical humans with new awareness.

Maybe that's why she'd noticed Zeke, at first. Or maybe she had been destined to notice him from the very beginning. Only time would tell.

The next morning, Celine did a little sleight of hand trick by leaving the barracks building out of the door on the far side, with Zeke's help and collusion to keep her presence unseen.

Then, she walked around to the kitchen door and walked in that way, as if she'd come from her own part of the island, ready for her shift.

She'd collect the little bag of clothing and toiletries she'd brought with her at some later point.

All that mattered was that, right now, she was in fresh clothes, and nothing looked amiss to her grandfather's, or coworkers', keen gazes.

Holding her breath for the first few minutes, she felt relief when nobody made any comments.

She'd worried about any lingering scent of Zeke she might have carried, but nobody said anything, so she figured she'd gotten away with it.

If they were going to keep doing this for any length of time, she knew she'd have to come clean, but for their first night together, she just wanted to hold the idea of them as a couple to herself and see how her inner seal reacted.

So far, her wild side liked Zeke a whole lot.

When he'd saved her life in the ocean, the seal had begun to almost worship the man for his skill and ability to protect her, but she needed more time to decide if that was something that would carry over in a day-to-day relationship and be certain it wasn't just hero worship.

After last night, her wild side liked him even more.

He knew how to play as well as protect, and he made both halves of her soul happy.

A tiny smile played about her lips when she wasn't careful to conceal it.

She wanted to keep her thoughts to herself for a little while longer and see what Zeke thought.

Only then—if they were both in agreement—would she consider going public with the relationship.

Her seal was a bit shier than most and didn't like being in the limelight.

Neither did her human side after all the attention paid her after her parents' murders.

For now, she would enjoy being with Zeke without the pressure of other people's opinions.

Because heaven knew, shifters weren't often shy about giving their opinions.
Especially her lion kin.

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Zeke put the little overnight bag Celine had brought with her last night into the back of his closet, minus her dirty clothes from the day before.

Those, he could easily put into the communal laundry chute, which would go to the base's central laundry and be redistributed from there.

She'd get her clothes back without anybody being the wiser.

Even if somebody questioned her clothes originating in his building, she worked here every day, and it wasn't beyond the realm of possibility that she'd change her clothes here sometime for whatever reason.

A spill in the kitchen. An after-work outing where she couldn't, or didn't want, to go back to her room to change.

He honestly didn't expect anyone to question it.

Last night had been magical. He'd enjoyed every moment of being with Celine from the comical way he'd snuck her into the building to the mind-blowing sex they'd shared.

He felt deeply for her already and wouldn't have minded if she'd wanted to shout their new relationship status from the rooftops, but Celine was cautious and more than a bit shy, he'd discovered to his delight.

He'd let her set the pace. He was a patient man. He could wait.

Pretending he didn't know what she looked like as she came was a bit harder in the light of day.

He took his breakfast in the dining hall and caught glimpses of her through the kitchen door a few times, but he was on duty that morning and couldn't linger.

Which was probably for the best. They had a day of psychometric testing scheduled to see if Zeke could glean anything further from some of the objects taken from Celine's house.

While he'd examined a lot of things while he was there, he and the team had decided to pack up a few smaller objects to bring back to base for a more detailed reading.

Lynn had spent time testing them all for evil magic, though Zeke had no real idea what that entailed.

She'd passed them, and today was the first opportunity for him to give them another look.

He was raring to go, hoping he could find more clues that would help the investigation.

They'd set him up in the lab this time, though all the observations were being recorded by hand since they'd decided hard copies were more difficult to steal than electronic data.

This time, their unit commander, Captain Haliwell, was there to observe, as was Liam Kinkaid, to give the shifter perspective.

Zeke was glad of that as he sat down to work.

He went through the first round of objects, eliciting only a few more details about the attack and the mage.

But when he moved on to the next set of objects, he hit pay dirt.

One of the knickknacks—a small porcelain bird figurine—held memories of a conversation that had not taken place at Celine’s house.

Far from it. Zeke stiffened in his chair, and everyone in the room went on alert, though Zeke only noted their reactions peripherally.

“What is it?” Hal asked, prodding Zeke to fill them in on what he saw.

“This was sent to the family as a gift, but it didn’t come from the person they thought.

It was a holiday gift, and they assumed it came from Great Aunt Tessy—or whoever was on the return address.

I don’t actually know the name on the package.

I’d need the packaging to see that, I think.

But I can see Celine’s mother admiring it for a few seconds before placing it on a shelf in the living room.

It was there through all the action, but that’s not what’s important.

” Zeke paused, scrunching his eyes closed as if that might somehow make him see things more clearly.

“What’s troubling you?” Lynn asked quietly, clearly wanting to help.

Zeke opened his eyes and sought hers. This probably was in her field of expertise. He still knew next to nothing about magic.

“Is it possible to place a spell on an object that reports back to the mage and then just dissipates, leaving the object un-magical from that point on? I mean, that lamp was bespelled, or whatever you call it, but it retained that magic and linked me to the mage. This thing, though...” Zeke lifted the little figurine which he held in one hand.

“It doesn’t have that same feel. Though, in the past, it did, for a short period.

Like it was sent, reported back and then fell silent, somehow. ”

Lynn looked intrigued. “As you know, I tested all of these objects yesterday, and none show any signs of residual magic. I’d have to check with my Gran, but what you’re describing is possible.

Probably some sort of low-level tattletale spell that is designed for a single use once the object reaches its destination, sends its information, and then, what little magic it was given is dispersed completely. ”

“That’s what this feels like. As if the moment Celine’s mother opened the box and touched the figurine, it launched its magic outward, never to return,” Zeke confirmed.

“A Trojan Horse?” Hal mused.

“Something to confirm the receiver’s identity, perhaps. So they could be sure they had the right address for Celine’s family. When was it sent? This year?” Liam asked Zeke.

“No. Last year,” Zeke replied.

“Can you tell who sent it or where it came from?” Liam continued his questioning.

Zeke nodded gravely. “It came from the mage. There are echoes of a conversation I can just about hear, as if this thing was in the room but not very near to the speakers. It’s two women.

The first one says something like, ‘ If we can find his family, then we can probably trace from them back to him. If we kill them, he’ll want revenge, and then, we can follow him back to where they are all hiding. ’ ”

Liam cursed. “This could be really bad if they’re talking about the master chief.”

Zeke held up his hand. “There’s more. The other one says, ‘We want them dead anyway. The vision was clear. They will side with the cursed Goddess worshipers and screw up our plans if we don’t rid the world of them before we go to war.

’ Then the other one laughs. ‘Either way, they will lead us to Santini, and he will lead us to the motherlode of military shifters. They have been a thorn in the side of our patron for many years, and he wants them all dead. Especially Santini.’ There’s a little more, but it’s too muffled, as if they were walking out of the room. Sorry.”

“Shit,” Liam cursed, losing his cool for a moment.

“This is big,” Rick agreed.

“I think we need to alert your dad to this right away, Liam,” Hal said, already standing as he headed for the door, the lion shifter following close behind. “You all carry on here. Let me know if there are any more developments.”

Zeke kept going with the rest of the objects they’d set up for him to read, but there were no other big revelations.

Finally, he sat back and looked at Lynn and Rick, who were regarding him with interesting expressions.

Rick looked sort of appraising and proud while Lynn seemed pleased as they both watched him.

“What?” Zeke finally asked. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Do you realize how far you’ve come?” Lynn asked in reply to his question.

Zeke wasn’t entirely sure what she meant.

“I threw in some truly ancient objects in this batch, and you didn’t bat an eye,” Rick added, as if that was meant to clarify his thoughts. It didn’t. At least not for Zeke.

“So? What’s the big deal? They weren’t violent artifacts. Just really old,” Zeke muttered.

“That should be our next test, actually,” Lynn said, turning to nod at Rick, who nodded back. Then, Rick turned back to Zeke and explained.

“Do you remember when you first got this gift? Everything you touched sent you into a spiral, and you passed out a lot. I mean, a lot,” Rick reminded him.

“You’ve grown stronger in just the past several days,” Lynn confirmed.

“It looks to us like the more you use your gift, the better you get at it. You’re also acclimating to its draw on your power. No more passing out,” Rick went on.

“Even the stone and its magical backlash didn’t really faze you. Or that lamp incident. Even this little figurine would have sent you unconscious a few months ago,

according to Rick's observations," Lynn went on, pointing to the little bird statue.

"Huh," Zeke said, taking in their words. They were right. He was getting better at this.

"Training and persistence. Just like all the other tasks we've mastered as Green Berets," Rick intoned as he stood and collected the items that were left on the table.

Lynn smiled broadly. "Or, as my granny always says, practice makes perfect."

Zeke went about his regular duties for the rest of the day.

He was off night shift this week. They rotated it among the single men, for the most part, so the guys with wives and girlfriends could have more quality time with their ladies.

Not that the guys who had women didn't take the occasional night patrol, but the single guys took the duty more often than not.

Whatever the brass was deciding to do with the bombshell information Zeke had discovered in his morning psychometric session, Zeke wasn't part of that decision-making chain.

Hal had warned the shifter hierarchy, and he'd been on that side of the base all day.

When he got back, Zeke and the rest of the unit would probably find out what steps they were going to take.

Zeke hoped it meant they were going into action.

Taking the fight to the enemy was always the best tactic, Zeke believed, and he didn't

want to just sit around here on the island, waiting for the mage and her supporters to strike. She had to know by now where Santini and the rest of them were.

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Unless... It might just be possible that though the enemies of Zeke's unit knew they were on the island, they might not realize that the island was otherwise populated by shifter soldiers.

It seemed ridiculous that they hadn't put that together, but their enemy wasn't known for sharing data among their various groups.

From the briefings Zeke had received and what he'd noted of their actions in the field, the enemy tended to operate as separate cells that didn't really communicate with each other.

Perhaps the good guys could use that to their advantage.

Of course, Hal and Kinkaid were probably well aware of all this already.

They were both strategic thinkers, and Zeke trusted that they'd come up with a workable plan between them to keep both the unit and the shifters safe.

Which Zeke really hoped meant some real-world action soon.

He wanted to go after the mage and her cronies himself.

He was heartily sick of sitting on the sidelines while others got to fight.

The one bright spot in his day was the plans he and Celine had made before she snuck out of his room this morning.

After dinner, he was going to meet her at the secluded tidal pool farther down the beach where she promised him they could swim together safely.

Or maybe more, if they had the place to themselves. He couldn't wait.

After dinner, Zeke waited until the appointed time before heading down the beach.

Celine was off duty and had promised to meet him.

He'd been dying to spend time with her all day.

She was fast becoming a need he could never fulfill.

He wanted to be around her all the time, but both of them had jobs to do and people counting on them.

He dreamed of a day when they could just be together.

Out in the open. Away from this island and the need to hide.

But he had to get the price off his head first, as well as stopping the people who were hunting her and her family.

He vowed to do just that. He wasn't sure how, yet, but he knew his unit and the shifters on this island were dedicated to both causes. They'd get the job done somehow, and he'd touch every damned object he had to in order to find a way to make that happen.

Jogging down the beach, Zeke spotted her silhouette against the moonlit waves, perched on a rock with her arms wrapped around her knees. Quietly, he approached, his boots swishing softly through the sand. She didn't turn, but her voice carried on

the breeze.

“It’s about time.” She turned to look at him, a smile lighting her face.

“It took me a bit longer to get away than I expected.” Zeke gave a wry smile.

“Well, I’m glad you’re here now,” she said, jumping down from her perch.

He liked her words and the way she smiled at him.

He stepped right up to her, wrapping his arms loosely around her waist. Celine leaned her head against his shoulder, and Zeke soaked in the contact like a man starved.

He wanted to pull her close and never let go, but instead, he just held her quietly, letting the moment settle.

The surf rolled in gentle pulses, the tide pulling water into the natural pool nestled between rocks nearby. Moonlight danced on its surface like scattered diamonds.

“I thought about you all day,” he said, his voice low.

She turned her face slightly toward his, the smile still lingering. “Same.”

Zeke reached for her hand, and she gave it willingly. Her fingers were warm, soft but strong. The same hands that had held him last night, that had touched him like he mattered. More than mattered.

“I know we’re still new,” he said, brushing his thumb along the back of her hand. “But I want you to know I’m not taking this lightly. Any of it. You mean something to me, Celine.”

She was quiet for a moment, her gaze drifting toward the stars above the water. Then she looked back at him, her expression open and unguarded.

“You mean something to me too, Zeke. I don’t know where this is going, but...I know it’s real. And I want more of it. Of us.”

That was all he needed to hear. He pulled her closer, shifting them both so they sat on the rock, her legs tucked over his. She didn’t resist—in fact, she leaned into him as if she belonged there.

And she did.

His mouth found hers slowly, deliberately. There was no urgency, no desperation. Just deep affection and connection, a kiss full of all the things he hadn’t had time to say.

She melted against him, her arms slipping around his neck. Her lips were warm and familiar, and her body fit against his like it had always been meant to be there. Last night had been electric—intense and physical—but this moment was just as powerful in its quiet way.

She pulled back just a little, brushing her nose against his. “If we’re not careful, I might get used to this.”

Zeke smiled. “Is that a bad thing?”

“Not if you keep kissing me like that.”

He laughed softly, lowering his forehead to hers. “Challenge accepted.”

They stayed like that, wrapped around each other as the ocean whispered nearby and

the stars looked on.

He held her close, one hand tracing slow, reassuring circles against her back.

Her breath was steady now, her body relaxed, and for a few precious minutes, it felt like the rest of the world didn't exist.

"I wish I could take us away from all the stuff going on in our lives," he murmured. "Just be somewhere else for a little while. Somewhere safe. Somewhere quiet. Just us."

She nodded, her voice a whisper. "Wouldn't that be something?"

And with her pressed close, the moon overhead, and her heartbeat echoing softly against his chest, Zeke made himself another vow.

Their time would come. She'd be safe, and he'd be free from pursuit. He'd move heaven and earth to make it happen.

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Zeke's arms were warm around her, his touch reverent. Celine could feel the slow, steady beat of his heart against her cheek, and it was almost enough to lull her into believing that nothing else existed. No island, no danger, no ghosts from her past.

Just Zeke. Just this.

His fingers moved in gentle circles on her back, and every pass of his hand stirred something inside her. Not just desire, though that was certainly there, but something deeper. Something that tugged at the core of who she was.

When he kissed her again, her whole body reacted.

There was nothing hurried in the way his lips moved against hers. No pressure. Just heat and tenderness and that simmering pull between them that never really let up. It had started the first time she'd seen him and had only gotten stronger since. More persistent. More imperative.

Her wild heart stirred restlessly inside her, more alert than it had been in a long time. It liked him. Trusted him. Recognized something in him that felt...right. Familiar.

Celine slipped her hands under his shirt, needing to feel his skin under her fingers. The warmth of him, the strength. He made a sound low in his throat, letting out a soft growl that sent a delicious shiver down her spine.

Zeke broke the kiss long enough to look at her, eyes searching. "Can we do this here? It's very exposed."

She smiled up at him. “This is the local trysting spot. Not that there are that many women on the island, but there are a few, and we shifters are not known for our abstinence. There’s a signal rock that I moved into position before you got here. We’ll have privacy.”

He grinned, his gaze going speculative. “You were that sure of me, eh? What if I didn’t want to put out?”

She couldn’t help it. She giggled. His humor appealed to her on every level.

“Well, I thought I might be able to convince you. Especially if I asked really nice and said pretty please.” She walked her fingers up his chest, teasing him with the slight pout of her lower lip.

He leaned down and nipped at her lip, then turned it into one of the hottest kisses they had shared yet. Oh, boy. Did somebody turn up the heat?

When he drew back, his expression had grown even hotter. His gaze was downright smoldering.

“We don’t have to rush anything,” he said, though his actions went somewhat against his words.

She was breathless as she met his gaze. “We’re not. We’re exactly where I want to be.”

Relief and something fierce and protective flickered in his expression before he lowered his head again, kissing her deeply, his mouth almost worshiping hers. His hands slid down to her waist, then lower, moving her around and onto his lap until her thighs straddled his.

She gasped softly at the sensation of him beneath her. He was so strong, solid, and more than a little aroused. Heat bloomed low in her belly, and any last remnants of hesitation melted away.

She leaned in, trailing kisses along his jaw, savoring the slight scratch of stubble against her lips. He tasted like salt and heat and Zeke. Her soldier, her rock, her incredible man with impossible gifts. And somehow, despite everything, he felt like hers .

His hands roamed her back, slow and possessive, until they slid under her shirt, fingertips brushing bare skin. Every touch lit her nerves on fire. She arched into him, her body fully awake now, fully alive.

Before last night, it had been so long since she'd felt anything like this. Desire, yes. But also joy. Hope. The ache of wanting more.

More of him. More of this. More of them .

Zeke pulled back slightly, resting his forehead against hers. His breath was ragged, his hands firm on her hips as if anchoring himself.

“I can’t stop thinking about you,” he admitted. “Even when I try my hardest.”

She cupped his face in her hands and met his gaze head-on, feeling sexier than she ever had. “I like your hardest .”

Something in his expression cracked wide open. He laughed low in his throat, and even that small sound made her tingle. She loved that she could laugh with him, even during sexy times.

“That’s good, babe, because you make me that way damn near every time you look at

me.” His voice was a sexy growl that set every last one of her nerve endings singing.

She was powerless to resist him. Not that she wanted to.

She moved closer, and when their lips touched again, the renewed kiss wasn’t tentative or teasing.

It was hungry. Certain. A claiming as much as a promise.

The surf shushed behind them, the stars twinkled overhead, and Celine gave herself to the moment—to the man—and to the bond she thought she could feel wrapping itself around her heart like a warm tide.

The world around them had disappeared for long moments out of time as he touched her with gentle reverence, as if he was memorizing her body.

She responded with equal intensity, her fingers finding the opening of his shirt, sliding beneath to trace the warm skin over his ribs, the hard lines of his back.

He was a fortress made of flesh and soul, and he let her in without hesitation.

They parted only long enough to tug off layers of clothing, breath coming faster, eyes never leaving each other.

The night air kissed her bare skin, but she wasn’t cold. Not with him.

Zeke eased her down onto the soft sand, their discarded clothing making a sort of nest beneath them. He propped himself up, half over her, one hand braced in the sand while the other cupped her cheek.

“Do you want me?” he murmured, voice husky with restraint.

Celine nodded, her answer already in her eyes. “I want this. I want you .”

His mouth found hers again. His kiss ignited a new level of desire. Each kiss that followed mapped a new part of her as he moved over her naked body until she was shaking beneath him, not from fear or nerves, but from the overwhelming rightness of it all.

He spent time on her breasts, licking her nipples and rolling them with his fingers gently, but firmly, just the way she liked.

Then he kissed his way down her torso, revealing hitherto unknown ticklish spots on her abdomen.

He spread her legs and brought his mouth to the apex of her thighs, kissing and licking the part of her that seemed neediest for his attentions.

Her breath came in shallow gasps as he brought her to the precipice of pleasure again and again before finally lifting up and moving over her.

When he reached for the condoms he had in his pocket, she stopped him. Her hand was gentle but firm on his arm.

“We don’t really need those. Shifters neither catch nor carry diseases like that and even with our true mates, it’s not easy for us to get pregnant. In fact, the only time it really happens is with true mates and then, only a few times in a lifetime. We should be safe enough.”

“Seriously?”

The stunned expression on his face amused her. She nodded, reaching up to kiss him, reigniting the passionate flame between them that had never truly dwindled. He

positioned himself between her legs and broke the kiss, looking deep into her eyes.

He held her gaze as he slid inside her welcoming body, his thick length making the possession powerful as he went slow, to give her time to adjust. The intensity of his gaze and his mastery of her response stole her breath completely. And then, he began to move.

They came together slowly at first, like a tide rolling in nearby.

Inevitable, steady, and powerful. She opened to him with no hesitation, no barriers left between their bodies.

He filled her completely, and it wasn't just about bodies.

It was about hearts. About souls. About finding something she hadn't even known she was looking for until the moment she looked into his eyes and knew . He was hers. And she was his.

The rhythm they found was gentle at first. Slow and deep and filled with emotion.

But it built steadily, a shared fire kindled by whispered promises and breathless moans, by fingers grasping and lips seeking and hearts reaching across the void between two wounded people who had finally found something real, with each other.

When release came, it did so with a shuddering wave of sensation that left her trembling, breathless, and utterly undone.

She felt him tense as she did, muffling his groans in her neck as she did her best to stifle the scream of pleasure that wanted to erupt from her lips.

They had privacy in the small grotto of the tidal pool, but sound still carried, and

shifters had sharp hearing.

Zeke held her close as they both came, crushing her to his chest. Then, he continued to hold her for long moments as they both came down from the high. He kept his arms around her, his lips brushing her temple, his chest rising and falling against hers.

Neither of them spoke right away. They didn't need to. But after a long moment, Celine tilted her head and looked at him.

"Babe, you rock my world," Zeke said as he lifted her to lay over him, draping his body with hers.

"Right back at you," she murmured, rubbing her lips against his chest, over his still pounding heart.

"Does this feel as special to you as it does to me?" he asked, surprising her with his tentative words.

"It's definitely not ordinary," she quipped, trying to keep things light.

She had a lot of thinking to do before she could figure out what was really going on here. Her inner seal wanted to play with him, but was that enough?

Zeke's gaze was clear and steady when she raised her head to look into his eyes. "Do you think it's possible for a gorgeous selkie girl to fall for a guy like me?"

She smiled, heart full. "I think it's a definite possibility."

There. She'd said that much. It was enough for now. It was a big step, and she'd probably have more to say to him, but she had to think first and figure out what she was feeling. There was one more thing though, that she could do to help her figure

things out...

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“Do you want to see my seal?” She needed to know he could accept all of her. Not just the woman in his arms now, but the other half too. The part of her that wasn’t human.

He sat up, taking her with him. She clung to his shoulders, trying to read his expression. Was he alarmed? No. He looked sort of curious and...eager? Hmm. That reaction boded well in her mind.

“Are you serious? I am so curious about shifters—and you, in particular. I’d love to meet your other half.”

His words were everything she could have hoped for, but the final test would be how he reacted when she shifted. She moved away from him, sitting a few feet distant. She took a deep breath for courage. “I hope you can handle a little weirdness.”

He sat opposite her, resting his arms on his knees, watching her closely. “Celine, I’ve seen my friend call lightning strikes like they were obedient puppies, another can walk through walls. Hell, I can touch a doorknob and see who opened it last Tuesday. Try me.”

She appreciated the levity, but the weight in her chest didn’t lift.

“We don’t usually just shift for anyone, for the fun of it. It’s personal. Like...” She looked deep into his eyes. “Like handing someone your baby photos, medical records, and diary all at once.”

“I want to know that side of you, Celine. I want to know everything about you. All of

it. If this is part of who you are, then I want to see.”

The sincerity in his voice nearly undid her.

She gave a shaky smile and called her inner magic.

The shift came quickly. A shimmer of magic as she reclined on the sand, where her seal felt closest to the surface.

Muscles flexed, bones reformed, and within seconds, she was in her seal form, sleek and dark against the silvery moonlight.

Zeke’s mouth dropped open. “Whoa.”

She jerked her head toward the tidal pool, inviting him to follow as she made her way into the water.

She bobbed once, then spun in a slow circle, water streaming off her pelt.

For a few minutes, she just played, making shallow dives, swimming in circles, and showing him not just the shape, but the spirit of her other self.

Finally, she swam back to him and shifted as she emerged from the water, reclaiming her human form in a shimmer of magic.

Zeke was waiting for her, his arms open as she stepped into his embrace. He didn’t flinch. Didn’t hesitate. Just wrapped her up in his arms and pulled her close.

“That was...” He paused, searching for words. “Incredible. You’re incredible.”

Relief loosened the knot in her chest. She hadn’t realized how much she’d needed his

acceptance until it hit her like a wave. Still, she kept it light.

“I clean up good, huh?”

Zeke chuckled, nuzzling her wet hair. “Babe, you’re adorable in both your forms.”

Celine’s heart turned over. He sounded sincere, and her seal hadn’t detected any distaste from him as she’d put on a little show for him. He had been genuinely fascinated, which touched her deeply. She had strong feelings for the man. She might actually be falling in love with him.

And there was no way to tell if that would save her...or destroy them both.

For a while longer, they lay together and listened to the rhythmic lapping of the waves.

Then, they shook out their clothing and got dressed again, but it seemed like neither one of them wanted their time together to end just yet.

They sat and talked about nothing and everything until, finally, the topic turned more serious.

“How long do you think it will be before we go into action?” Celine asked in a quiet voice.

Zeke’s eyebrows rose. “We?”

“I know I’m not a soldier, but it’s my right under shifter law to seek justice against those who killed my parents.

I’ve already talked about this with my grandfather, and he promised me I could go

along when he goes after the mage who killed them.

I know I don't look like the rest of the soldiers around here, but I'm a hunter in my other form, and I'm not afraid to kill.

To be honest, my human half wants to bathe in that bitch's blood for what she did to my parents.

I need to be there when she gets taken down.

I need to watch her die, even if I'm not the one to do it.

Gramps will probably get that honor, but I'm okay with that.

I do have this need, though, to confront her in some way.

I don't know how it's all going to play out, but my wild side needs to see her.

Maybe get some answers that way." She shook her head, not really sure why she needed it, just that she did.

Zeke was quiet for a while before he finally answered.

"I can understand the need to see her pay. But don't ask me to be comfortable with the idea of bringing you into a war zone.

I...care about you, Celine. I don't like the idea of you being in danger.

That said, if they do let you go on the mission, I want you to know you can count on me to help in whatever way I can. "

She reached out and put her hand over his, turning it over to intertwine their fingers.

“Thank you for that. I know how you macho types don’t like seeing us little women fighting.

It’s the same with shifter males. Even though there are many cases in the wild where the females are deadlier than the males, we are human too, and the human sensibilities get mixed up with the animal ones.

Somehow, that seems to produce men who are overly protective of the women in their families, Tribes, Packs and Clans.

It’s both a little annoying and kind of adorable in a caveman sort of way.

We put up with it because it’s nice to have the protection of a big strong man, sometimes. Even if we don’t always need it.”

She giggled and was pleased when he squeezed her hand. “Noted. You’re a badass, though you can pretend otherwise to protect my fragile male ego.”

“And don’t you forget it,” she teased him.

They fell silent for a little while before she spoke again.

“I keep thinking,” Celine began, her voice tight, “what if I freeze when I see her?”

Zeke’s brow furrowed. “Didn’t you just get through telling me you were stronger than you looked?”

She shook her head, a bitter laugh escaping. “I am. But I’m also a cook’s assistant, Zeke. Not a soldier. I’ve hunted prey in my wild form since I was old enough to learn

how, but confronting someone in my human form isn't something I do every day."

"You're the daughter of two warriors," he countered gently. "I saw how they fought against the mage. Both of your parents were brave and strong. And you've survived the trauma of losing them better than most people could."

Her gaze dropped to her hands. "Surviving isn't the same as living."

"I know," he said quietly. "After my brother died, I existed. Angry. Hollow. It wasn't until I joined the Army that I felt like I had a purpose again."

She looked up, meeting his eyes. Vulnerable. Raw. "And now?"

He smiled softly. "Now, I'm sitting here with a woman who makes me believe there's more to life than fighting."

Her breath caught, and for a moment, the world narrowed to just the two of them. The soldier haunted by the past and the selkie searching for justice. Celine leaned in slightly, her voice barely a whisper.

"You're not at all what I expected."

"Good," Zeke murmured, his thumb brushing over her knuckles. "Because neither are you, babe. In fact, you're everything I never knew I needed."

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Zeke walked Celine back to her side of the island, running into the shifter night patrol at one point, but they passed with simple nods of acknowledgment.

Zeke was glad they weren't hassling Celine or himself.

He didn't really know where they were going with their relationship, but he had realized that whatever happened, he needed to be with her.

In whatever capacity she'd allow. If she wanted to friend-zone him after this, then he'd have to accept that, even if he didn't particularly like it.

He didn't think that would happen, but it was all up to her.

He would do whatever she wanted. He was that desperate to be near her, looking after her, protecting her, in whatever way he could.

Though, he had to admit, after the past two nights, he would give anything to be her lover.

Maybe even her mate. Though he still didn't know exactly how that worked.

He had to find a way to get some answers about that particular subject without being too obvious.

First though, he had to figure out a way to protect her if she did get invited along on the mission he knew the brass was already planning.

Every one of his instincts revolted at the idea of bringing her along on such a dangerous trip, but it wouldn't be up to him.

Ultimately, the shifters had say over who did what on their side of the island, and because his unit was officially grounded, they would be working under the auspices of the shifter command.

That's how things had been working ever since they'd gotten to this island.

Zeke only had a few hours of sleep that night, and they were troubled by thoughts of Celine being in danger. But he didn't have time to dwell on that the next morning when the entire unit was called in a briefing. He'd been expecting this. It was time to talk about how to go on the offensive.

"Up to this point, we been reacting instead of taking the fight to the enemy." Captain Haliwell was leading the briefing in the big conference room.

Most of the unit members were there, except a couple who were keeping watch.

Liam Kincaid and Master Chief Santini were also there, representing the shifter contingent.

Zeke was glad to see Santini. He hoped to get a chance to talk to the master chief after the meeting, if possible, about how to best safeguard Celine if she did end up going on the mission with them.

But that was for later. Right now, he was very intrigued by what his commander had to say.

"Thanks to recent intelligence breakthroughs, we now have multiple targets." Hal hit the button, and the lights went down in the briefing room, as a display lit up on the far

wall.

“Starting at the top, we have Abdul Kettering.” The reclusive billionaire’s face came up on the display in a surveillance shot taken from a distance at what looked like a private airstrip.

“For those who don’t know or need a refresher, he’s the son of a German arms merchant, carrying on the family business.

Actually, Abdul has been expanding the business into more unsavory, illegal, and even radical places since inheriting everything on the death of his father.

We don’t know the whereabouts of his mother.

She dropped off the radar years ago and there was speculation that she’d died under mysterious circumstances, but nobody knows for sure.

Abdul has been on our radar for a long time, but we never had the direct linkage of intel that we have now.

Not only has Abdul been supplying weapons to the wrong sides of several conflicts important to our government and allies, but we now know that he has confirmed ties to the Venifucus and a trio of mages, one of whom took out Master Chief Santini’s son and daughter-in-law in a sneak attack.

Both of them were selkies, and according to Zeke’s report, they put up a valiant fight and acquitted themselves well.

The fact that they were both killed by this one woman is no shame to them, but rather, a salient warning about the caliber of enemy we’re planning to take down. ”

Hal nodded respectfully to the master chief, who nodded in return. Everybody in the room was giving Hal their full attention. An eagerness came over them. They were warriors. None of them enjoyed being cooped up on this island, unable to use their hard-won skills.

“Because of the personal nature of the transgressions of this single mage, and reports that she is in the area, we’ve decided to go after her first. And when I say we, I mean to say that this will be a joint Army and Navy endeavor.

I haven’t talked much about this with anybody yet, but there have been discussions at a higher level than mine about the fate of our unit.

At the very least, it’s clear we can’t go back to what we were doing before.

But what we’ll be able to do in the future remains up in the air.

There has been talk of decommissioning us entirely.

Retiring us and putting us out to pasture.

” Rumbles went up from around the room at that pronouncement, but Hal still held their attention.

“There has also been talk of posting us permanently to this base and Commander Kincaid, having us work alongside the other special troops assigned here. Consider this mission a trial run for that second option. We all need to learn to work together, utilizing each other’s strengths to the best of our abilities. Do you understand?”

It was a loaded question. Hal had just let them know that there was a possibility they could all be out of a job very soon if they didn’t learn to play nice with the shifters. Each and every man responded with an affirmative ooh rah that almost shook the

walls with its intensity.

“Now, thanks to our Navy friends and their ability to infiltrate places where even we might have trouble getting in, we know that the mage in question is holed up on a very exclusive estate on the North Fork of Long Island. They’ve been monitoring communications in and out of the estate and discovered that she arrived back in the U.S.

in response to the magical contact Zeke reported after his mission to the Santini home on the coast of Connecticut.

Research has uncovered that the estate is owned by Kettering, through several shell companies.

Lieutenant Kinkaid, would you like to continue with what your people have uncovered?

” Hal turned over the briefing to the shifter officer in the room.

Liam Kinkaid stood, his slightly shaggy blond hair and exceedingly tall frame dominating the space.

Every member of Zeke’s unit was taller and a lot bigger than average, but some of these shifters were downright massive, though not in a bulky bodybuilder sort of way.

No, these guys were sleek fighting machines, and in Liam’s case, Zeke knew he owed his size and physique to his wild side.

Liam Kincaid was a big-ass lion shifter.

“Thank you, Captain Haliwell. And thank you, Zeke, for perhaps unintentionally,

luring the mage back to the United States. We have recordings of her saying unequivocally that she returned here based on your interaction with that magical lamp trap at the Santini home. If not for that, we'd still be looking for her," Liam said, surprising Zeke a bit, but in a good way.

He was glad his misstep with the lamp had brought about the discovery of the mage's location. Hell, she'd even come running so they didn't have to go far to kill her. Wasn't that accommodating of her?

Liam went on with his briefing, using the display to show aerial images, topographical maps, and schematics of the mansion and grounds of the estate in question.

There was one giant, opulent house, along with several outbuildings set aside for different uses.

A guest house. A pool house. Various garages and storage sheds, as well as barns and animal enclosures. Lots of places for people to hide.

"We had one of our bird shifter soldiers do a flyover last night, along with some of the werewolves who prowled around the grounds. They picked up a lot of scents which altogether indicate that she's gathering a small army around her.

A sort of strike team that is almost ready to take action against us.

Until yesterday, we thought they were just looking for Celine, and that we could hide her effectively.

But, again, thanks to Zeke, we now know that they were targeting Celine and her parents in order to bring the master chief out into the open so they could follow him back to the rest of us.

Their original plan was to bring down as many shifter soldiers as they could because they see us as a threat to their ultimate goal.

However, the communications intercepts indicate that she's been putting two and two together and realizing that the Green Berets everybody seems to be interested in are now working with us, and have somehow gotten involved in this situation.

There's a recording of her cackling with her mentor about killing two birds with one stone. "

"And now that they've connected us with the shifters," Hal put in from the other side of the table, "and they know where we are...they also know where the shifters are. So, it's a good news, bad news situation.

On the plus side, they aren't just after Celine or the master chief alone anymore.

And they're not quite ready to attack us yet, according to the surveillance done last night.

We'll still have the element of surprise if we're ready to go after them first. On the down side, this may mean that two separate enemies are now working together against us.

There were the foreign agents who were after us and the mage who was after the shifters.

Both were formidable opponents separately, but now, it's likely that they're combining forces.

Also, our presence here on this island has inadvertently given away the presence of the shifters, endangering them more than I like," Hal admitted, shaking his head.

“We knew that was going to happen sooner or later,” Liam said with a slow shake of his head. “Don’t feel bad about it, Captain. Change is inevitable, and after this matter is settled, we’re all going to have to take a hard look at how, and where, we move forward.”

Well, that sounded ominous. Zeke looked around the table and realized everybody else wore the same expression he probably had on his face. Things were going to change, and soon. He just hoped it would be for the better.

“There’s one other thing,” Liam continued after a short pause, turning his attention to Zeke, meeting his gaze directly. “If you’re willing to try another reading, our patrols picked up a few items from the estate last night. They may be nothing, or they may help...”

Zeke perked up. “Absolutely. Anything I can do to help.”

After a short consultation with Rick, Hal asked for Lynn to be summoned to the meeting room so Zeke could do the readings right then and there.

This was the first time since they’d been overseas that Zeke had used his new power in front of the entire unit.

Mostly, he’d been using it under Rick and Lynn’s close supervision.

The other guys knew vaguely that he was getting better at controlling his new gift, but a few of them still looked skeptical.

Zeke couldn’t really blame them. The last time they’d seen Zeke use his power, he’d been reeling from the new ability and had gone unconscious more than once from artifact overload. He’d learned a lot since then.

Liam grabbed a small canvas satchel he'd had beside his chair and fished out a few plastic baggies, placing them on the table in front of himself.

All eyes turned when Lynn knocked then entered the conference room, looking around questioningly.

In short order, she was giving the objects her own examination.

"This one could be a problem, but I don't think any of these other items have a magical imprint. Still, I'd urge caution," she said quietly, lining up the little evidence bags on the table in front of her, holding that problematic one back from the others.

Zeke nodded and gestured for her to push the items in his direction. Rick intervened, sitting between them. He opened the first bag, dumping out the small object in front of Zeke. He put out a finger, exercising the caution Lynn had advised.

The item was the ring off an aluminum drink can. A bit of detritus that might contain information. Or not.

"This is recent. Two days ago, a man was a little too rough with the can and ripped this ring right off. He only touched it briefly, but while he was touching it, he was surrounded by three other large men who were cleaning weapons. They look like hired guns. Professional soldiers. And they all spoke a dialect of Chinese I'm not entirely familiar with," Zeke reported.

"Get Carter," Hal ordered, summoning a member of the unit who had been left on watch and not at the meeting.

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Within moments, Carter, the language expert of the unit, joined the session.

Painstakingly, Zeke repeated the few words that he could hear of the conversation.

He had to go back and repeat a few things to get the pronunciation just right, but Carter worked with him, coaxing out a snippet of a conversation that made sense.

Carter had already been good at languages before they met the ancient djinn at the Tower of Babel, but the gift he had been given allowed him to understand any language, any dialect, whether the language was still in use or had been dead for centuries.

Right now, he was able to identify a dialect of Chinese that was used in a mountainous region. The origins of the language didn't matter so much as what the men had been saying. Even from just the small amount of conversation Zeke could catch, a few things were clear.

First, the men were mercenaries, though going by their uniforms and the tattoos on their skin that Zeke described, it was believed they had been part of the so-called Blood Wolves— a Special Operations unit located in the northeast of China. The men likely had skills and experience.

Second, their conversation also hinted that they had at least a rudimentary understanding of shifters.

Zeke could see that they were loading their magazines with silver ammunition, and they shared a joke about poisoning two-legged animals.

At least, that was the closest translation Carter could come up with for the terms they used.

So it was clear that they knew about shifters and the effect silver had on their systems.

And third, they seemed to know more about magic than Zeke's unit had until recently.

He heard them talking about the mage they were working for and how they would not like to mess with her.

Just as the small piece of aluminum was tossed away, Zeke heard half of a sentence describing how one man had seen her drain the life out of an enemy.

It sounded as if he admired her strength and lethal abilities. Zeke felt only disgust.

When they'd finished picking over the snippet of conversation Zeke had been able to pick up from that otherwise innocuous object, Hal summarized what they had learned from it.

"So, now we know we're dealing with at least three Chinese mercenaries, allied with evil.

" Hal shook his head. "The People's Republic doesn't lose a lot of its Special Operators to the soldier of fortune lifestyle, generally speaking.

And, according to the discussions I've had with our new base commander, the rest of the world is pretty much as in the dark about magic and shifters as we were.

Although, culturally, some people are predisposed to accept the existence of such

things more easily.

Still, Commander Kincaid insists that shifters all over the world do their utmost to keep the secret of their existence from regular society. ”

Everyone looked over at Liam and the master chief, who both nodded their agreement, but didn't say anything more on the subject.

“There is the potential that these mercenaries either have some kind of magic of their own or were recruited by the Veinfucus or some local sect with similar goals. Lynn has been telling me about the different flavors of magic and the different groups of followers of each kind that she knows about,” Rick put in, looking over at her.

“And there are probably more evil-leaning sects that even my grandmother doesn't know about,” Lynn agreed.

Hal nodded. “All right. On to the next item.”

This time, a single paperclip was put in front of Zeke.

He saw the image of a young woman in some kind of conference room with a row of New York State Civil Procedure books lined up behind her on a bookshelf.

He got the impression it was a law office, and she had handled the paperclip while putting it on a set of documents that had somehow found its way onto the estate.

He couldn't discern much more than that, so they moved on to the next item.

And then the next. And then the one after that.

Other than identifying how they had arrived on the estate, none of the objects were of

much help in telling them anything new.

Then, Lynn turned over that final piece she had segregated from the others.

Zeke could see it was a shiny piece of what looked like obsidian as it was placed before him.

It wasn't a complete piece. Rather, it looked like a shard that had been broken off something bigger.

It had a sharp edge and crush points along its side.

Regardless of the damage, it gleamed with an oil slick-like sheen common to the volcanic glass variety known as rainbow obsidian.

Normally an innocuous stone, sometimes used in jewelry, this particular piece made Zeke uneasy. The jagged shard sat on the table like it was daring him to touch it.

"This one reads as enchanted in some way," Lynn cautioned. "It's obviously damaged, which could negate whatever spell had been put on it, but just tread carefully."

Zeke stared at the sliver of enchanted stone, its surface faintly pulsing with residual magic. It didn't look like much, but neither had that lamp. Still, if there was a chance it could give them more information, Zeke had to pursue it.

Zeke flexed his fingers. Drawing a steadying breath, he reached out and pressed his fingertip to the shard. The reaction was immediate.

A violent surge of energy tore through him, sharper than anything he'd felt before.

His vision blurred as a flood of fragmented images assaulted his mind.

Flashes of shadowy castle corridors, a woman's distorted laughter, blood on cold stone.

The overwhelming sensation of drowning in darkness.

He tried to pull back, but the magic clung to him like barbed wire.

Pain lanced through his skull, and with a grunt, Zeke threw himself backward, pushing his chair back from the table a good foot and a half. At least he'd managed to break the connection.

"What did you see?" Hal asked as everyone watched him carefully, the mood in the room alert and concerned.

Zeke dragged a hand through his hair, frustration simmering beneath the fading ache in his head.

"Too much—and not enough. The images were scrambled, chaotic. Stone corridors and blood. A woman cackling in a sinister way. It was pretty intense. My head is still ringing, and it caused a lot of pain in my skull like my brain was about to explode."

"Dark magic. I'm sorry, Zeke. I thought the damage to the stone would be enough to cancel out whatever had ensorcelled the blade." Lynn exhaled sharply, enclosing the shard in a cotton bag. Zeke rolled his shoulders, ignoring the lingering throb in his skull.

"Blade?" Zeke asked, curious.

"It's just a guess, but your reaction sort of confirms it."

Some forms of witchcraft use a ceremonial blade called an athame.

Most of the time, it's just a simple knife, and it's used symbolically to cut ties with the past or with something that no longer serves the magic user.

But some of the people pursuing darker paths—those using blood magic—will use their athames to spill blood and take lives.

It's an evil practice studied only by the worst of the worst. I think this piece of obsidian was part of an athame that somehow got crushed or broken so that this shard came off it.

” Lynn put the object away, and Zeke breathed a bit easier.

“That puts the ceremonial knife on the estate,” Rick pointed out.

“Confirming another link to evil in that place,” Lynn agreed.

“But I'd really like to know who it belonged to and how it was broken,” Rick said, making notes.

“I'm sorry. I don't think I'll be able to tell you that,” Zeke admitted, still feeling a little overwhelmed by the overload to his gift caused by the shard.

“No problem,” Rick assured him. “It's good enough to have the further link.

“You should be proud of yourself, Zeke,” Lynn said with a small grin.

“Your abilities are getting stronger with each session. When we first started working together to assess your gift, you probably would've passed out from that contact.

Not only did you pull yourself out of it this time, but even though you might have a little headache, you're still conscious and talking to us.

I'd say this is a big win for you. You're becoming the master of your abilities, rather than the other way around. ”

Huh . Zeke thought about her words for a moment, liking what she'd said.

He hadn't enjoyed passing out from using his gift as he had quite a few times in the beginning.

It impaired him in his job, and he knew he would never be approved to go back out into the field if it kept happening.

This was a good sign. If he had control over his gift, he might be able to go back to work as soon as the unit was cleared of the threat and able to get back out there and fight the good fight. Lynn was right. Things were looking up.

Later that day, Hal called another emergency meeting of the entire unit after he got back from consultation with Lester Kinkaid, the lion shifter who was in command of the base. Zeke wasn't surprised by the urgency in Hal's words when he told them about the mission.

“Our resident foreseers can't help us on this one,” Hal announced once the meeting started. He looked at Jeeves, who shrugged, looking a bit embarrassed.

“Rose and I have talked this over with Lynn and it's likely that someone over on that estate is using magic to actively block our visions. I wasn't even sure that was possible, but Lynn says it is something that some powerful mages can do,” Jeeves explained, still looking sheepish.

“Which only confirms that someone over there is up to no good,” Hal took over again.

“We’re going before first light,” he told them in no uncertain terms. “We want to be on the estate just before dawn. If they’re assembling an army over there to assault this island, we’re going to go on the offense and stop them before they have time to get all their ducks in a row. ”

Zeke liked that plan. He saw from the expressions on the faces all around that the other guys did too. They’d been sitting around on the island for far too long without seeing any action. It was one thing to train, but at some point, a guy had to use his training or lose his edge.

“Wil, I want you to lay the groundwork with some subtle fog, then ramp it up as we move in. Doable?” Hal asked their weather expert.

Wil, who had been nicknamed Thor by some of the unit for his ability to control the weather and send lightning bolts down to smite his enemies, nodded. “Can do, sir.”

Hal nodded back. “We’ll have a large contingent of shifters with us.

This is a joint operation, but we’re all going to be using our new specialties to one degree or another.

Wil goes in with the advance group, made up of shifters and led by Lieutenant Kinkaid.

Wil, I want you to liaise with Liam and be our point of contact. ”

Wil looked pleased as Hal handed out a few more specific assignments to the other guys. Finally, he made his way around to Zeke.

“Zeke, I’m assigning you to stick with Celine and her grandfather. I know they want to be in on the take-down, but I want you to try to hold them back, if you can.”

“Sir, I’ll try, but I don’t think I can stop the master chief from doing anything he pleases,” Zeke objected as politely as he could.

Was Hal serious? Or did he just not know the shifters in question well enough?

Zeke suspected it was the latter, and it was his duty to fill in his commander about what he knew.

“I understand the challenge,” Hal replied. “I’m hoping his desire to protect his granddaughter will override his need for vengeance.”

“Sir, it’s not just the master chief. Celine has spoken to me about wanting to be in on the kill and that it’s her right under shifter law.

I don’t pretend to know what that entails exactly, but you should know that the other shifters will probably not only allow them to be present when the mage is brought to justice, but might encourage one or both of them to be the ones to deliver the kill shot.

” Zeke felt as if he couldn’t make it any plainer.

He’d informed his commander of what he knew.

Now, it would be up to Hal to use that information or ignore it at his own peril.

Hal grimaced. “I see. I’ll keep that in mind, but I can hope that whoever takes out the mage does it quickly and with as little fuss as possible.

Her skills are great, according to all the evidence we have so far.

I don't want to drag it out any longer than we have to and give her a chance to potentially do even more harm. ”

They went on to plan the rest of the mission, and then, Hal dismissed them all to prepare. They were going to leave well before dawn, so they had to get their gear prepped and manage some sleep before showtime.

In the middle of all that, they were going to have dinner with some of the shifter troops that would be going on the mission with them the next day.

Liam Kinkaid brought over a couple of platoons of his soldiers, and they filled the cafeteria.

The kitchen was churning out even more food than usual, and Zeke noted extra bodies at work in the industrial kitchen whenever the doors swung open and he could get a glance inside.

After they all ate together and got to know each other a little better, the master chief and his granddaughter came out to join them for dessert.

It was good to encourage a little camaraderie before they all faced the enemy together the next day, though Zeke would have enjoyed spending more time alone with Celine.

He couldn't be greedy, though. The rest of his friends needed to get to know her so they could all help protect her, if needed, the next day.

The group lingered over dessert and spent a lot longer in the cafeteria than they usually did, talking quietly with their new friends and comrades.

Eventually, the unit migrated to their common room, farther down the hall on the ground floor, where they would pick up any gear they didn't already have in their personal kit, and prep for action tomorrow.

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The shifters had brought over crates of supplies before dinner and stacked it in the common room, which was helpful.

The rest of the gear was brought up from the basement tech offices.

Things like tactical radios and other communications devices.

The weapons were in the armory and would be the last items added to their setup, but everything would be ready before the men sought their beds that night.

Zeke joined his friends in their near-silent ritual of checking over their equipment and making sure everything was set up to his liking.

He'd made a quick run up to his room to get his tactical vest and some other things he'd be wearing, then spread it out before him as he sat around the large table with his friends.

Quite a few of them had chosen to sit at the big table in one corner of the large room.

Others had set themselves up on couches or easy chairs, and a few were on the floor, working quietly.

There was a buzz of anticipation among the men.

It had been a long time since they'd gone out as a unit, and they all felt the anticipation of the test they would face the next day.

Zeke was excited, but also cautious since he knew there was no way to stop Celine from being at the center of the action.

His instinct to protect her was at war with his respect for her abilities and right to justice.

He wished she would let him take care of the mage for her, but he suspected it wouldn't be that simple.

His thoughts spun around in circles as he added each piece of equipment to his gear. He'd been at this for more than an hour, but he couldn't really bring himself to stop just yet. He was working off his nerves, trying to center himself and make certain he was prepped and ready for the next day.

Zeke adjusted the straps on his tactical vest for the third time, knowing damn well they didn't really need any more adjusting.

Everything was in place, as it had been for the past hour, but sitting still wasn't his favorite thing to do.

The low-level hum of the barracks common room was broken by quiet words from the man who moved to sit next to him.

Zeke didn't need to look up to know who it was.

"You're still here," Dan said, his voice carrying that familiar edge of amusement as he sat. "Figured you'd be getting some extra shuteye before showtime."

Zeke let out a quiet huff, meeting Dan's gaze. "Could say the same about you."

Dan shrugged, leaning casually against the back of his chair like they weren't heading

into a life-or-death situation in a few hours. “Sleep’s overrated before missions. Too many ghosts in my head.”

Zeke nodded, understanding all too well. The silence stretched between them, not uncomfortable, but heavy with unspoken thoughts. Dan was the first to break it.

“She’s got you twisted up,” he said, his tone softer now, lacking the usual teasing. His sharp gaze pinned Zeke with unnerving accuracy. “Celine.”

Zeke’s jaw tightened, but Dan raised a hand before he could respond.

“Relax. I’m not here to give you grief. Just...

I want you to know we’ll all be watching out for her.

Don’t get sidetracked from the task at hand.

She’s a shifter. She can handle herself, or they wouldn’t allow her on the mission.

Plus, she’ll have big, scary Santini at her side.

The guy’s a legend among the SEAL Teams.”

Zeke exhaled slowly, the weight of Dan’s words settling in his chest.

“I’m not planning on being stupid. I know she’s got a lot of people watching over her,” Zeke muttered, though he wasn’t sure if he was trying to convince Dan or himself.

Dan’s lips quirked, the smirk returning just enough to lighten the mood. “Good. Because I’d hate to explain to Hal why you got yourself killed on what should be a

relatively easy mission.”

Zeke shook his head, a faint smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. Dan clapped him on the shoulder, firm and grounding.

“Seriously,” Dan added, his voice dropping. “Don’t wait too long to tell her what’s in your heart if what you’re feeling is as serious as I think it is. We don’t get many quiet moments in this line of work.”

With that, Dan turned and disappeared down the hall, leaving Zeke alone with the echo of his advice. How the hell did Dan know that Zeke was in love with Celine? He didn’t think he’d been that transparent. But, hell if the man wasn’t right. Shit .

Zeke got up and stowed his gear, ready for tomorrow. After that, he didn’t waste time. Dan was right, and Zeke knew Celine wouldn’t be able to sleep either.

It didn’t take long to find her. The moonlight guided his steps toward the beach where the light wind carried the briny scent of the sea. She stood near the water line, arms wrapped around herself, staring out at the dark waves. He approached quietly, but she spoke without turning.

“Can’t sleep?” Her voice was soft, carried away slightly by the wind.

“Nope,” Zeke replied, coming to stand beside her.

For a while, they stood in silence, the ocean’s rhythmic pulse filling the void between words. He glanced at her profile—the determined set of her jaw, the flicker of uncertainty in her eyes.

When she finally spoke, her voice was tight.

“I can’t believe that justice might finally be within my reach. I’ve wanted to know what happened for so long, and now that I do... And she’s so close... I want her dead, but I’m afraid I’ll mess up somehow, and she’ll escape.” Her words were clipped, her fingers tightening around her arms.

Zeke didn’t hesitate. He reached out, letting his hand brush against hers, grounding her.

“You won’t mess up,” he said quietly. “Because you’re not facing her alone.”

Celine turned to look at him then, vulnerability shimmering just beneath the surface of her gaze. The wind tugged at her hair, a wispy halo in the moonlight, and Zeke felt something shift inside him. Like everything in his world had just aligned.

He cupped her cheek, giving her every chance to pull away. She didn’t. Her gaze held his, steady and sure, even as her breath hitched.

When their lips met, it wasn’t rushed. It was slow, deliberate. A promise forged in the quiet before the storm. He deepened the kiss, filling it with everything he hadn’t dared to say yet, until the wind and the waves were nothing but background noise to the pounding of his heart.

When they finally pulled apart, Celine rested her forehead against his, her voice barely more than a whisper.

“We all better come back in one piece, Zeke. I have plans for you tomorrow night, after this is finally over.”

Zeke smiled, his thumb brushing lightly along her jaw. “Right back at you, babe.”

They stood like that for a moment longer, drawing strength from each other before

turning back toward the buildings. He walked her all the way to her barracks on the other side of the island. Leaning in to kiss her before they got too close where they'd be easily seen.

"How about I come get you in the morning?" he asked, gazing into her eyes in the dim light of the moon.

"I probably won't get much sleep tonight, and I'm usually up well before I need to be out the door.

I'll come get you, and we can walk together to the boat ramp.

Or would you rather I keep my distance?"

She stepped closer to him, pressing her body against his. "I'd rather spend the night in bed with you, but then, we'd both be in sorry shape for the battle ahead." She reached up to kiss his jaw, then worked her way around to his lips.

"I like the sound of that," he quipped when she drew back and smiled up at him. "I'd like it even more if it wouldn't put either one of us in danger. We both need to be sharp tomorrow, and it's going to be hard enough to rest as it is."

"I know." She placed her hand over his heart for a moment, then drew away slowly.

"But to answer your question, I'd love it if you picked me up on your way to the boat ramp.

My grandfather will probably want to check me over, but I'm not hiding our friendship, Zeke.

Sneaking around doesn't feel right, and the other shifters will understand.

And even if they are concerned, or whatever, they can just keep their opinions to themselves.

We're grown adults. We can manage our own affairs.

Question is, what will your friends think? "

"They'll give me shit," he said at once, smiling to soften his words.

"It's what we do. But they've all seen you.

It's pretty obvious to them that I've been interested in you for a while.

They may tease me about it, but they like you, and they won't say anything to make you uncomfortable if they know what's good for them.

" His smile broadened with a lethal edge, and she laughed in response.

She kissed him once more, with longing, before she stepped back and walked the rest of the way to her barracks building. She waved once before going inside, and he stood there until he saw the light go on in her bedroom. Then, he turned to go, making his way back to his own lonely bed.

Zeke met no resistance when he opened the door to the shifter dorm the next morning before dawn. Everybody was already awake and preparing for the day, and there was an electricity in the air. Zeke went directly to Celine's room and found the door already open.

He leaned against the doorframe, watching Celine secure a small blade at her hip. She moved with quiet efficiency, but he could see the tension in her shoulders.

“You ready for this?” he asked softly.

Her head snapped up, those sea-glass eyes locking onto his. “I’ve been ready for a year.”

He stepped closer, lowering his voice. “I didn’t mean just the fight.”

For a heartbeat, neither of them spoke. The weight of what was ahead—the danger, the vengeance, the unknown—settled between them.

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“I’m still a little apprehensive,” she admitted, her voice barely above a whisper. “Not of facing her. But of what comes after.”

Zeke reached out, tucking a stray strand of her soft hair behind her ear. “Whatever comes after, you won’t face it alone. We have important things to discuss later, once this mission is over.”

Her breath hitched. He just smiled at her, hoping to heaven that she was on the same page.

He’d come to some conclusions during the night spent in his lonely bed.

He’d share those conclusions with her at the earliest opportunity, once this battle was over, and see what happened.

One thing he’d decided for certain was that he couldn’t keep going the way they were.

He wanted her in his life on a more permanent basis.

Now, he just had to discover if she wanted the same thing.

Her eyes searched his, as if looking for doubt, and finding none. He dipped his head to give her a fast kiss. It wasn’t rushed or desperate, just quick because they didn’t have much time. It was a promise of more to come. Later.

When they pulled apart, she rested her forehead against his chest, staying close for

just a moment.

“If you get yourself killed, I’ll find a way to bring you back just so I can kick your ass,” she whispered, a faint smile playing on her lips.

Zeke chuckled. “Deal. If I’m dumb enough to get killed, I’ll deserve the ass kicking. But seriously, babe, it’ll be okay. This is what I do for a living. What I’ve trained for most of my life.”

“You’ve never faced a mage before. And this one already has at least two shifter kills to her name. She’s probably killed a lot of people on her way to where she is now. Don’t take this too lightly,” Celine warned.

“I won’t. I don’t,” Zeke assured her. “I promise.”

They walked over to the boat ramp together, and the others started arriving a few minutes later.

A few of the shifters stopped long enough to pat Celine on the shoulder or offer her a quick hug.

Then, they all boarded the waiting boats.

Zeke was in a boat with Celine and Santini, as he’d been assigned, and would stay with them to the bitter end of this mission.

The small, low-profile boats ran as silently as possible with no lights.

This early in the day, they didn’t encounter anyone else, though they could see a number of fishing boats with their lights on along the shore, getting ready to go out to sea at first light.

They were traveling to the North Fork of Long Island, which wasn't a very long trip, and for the last leg of it, they coasted as best they could to approach the beachfront owned by the target estate from multiple angles.

If there were patrols on the beach, they wanted to overwhelm them with landings all along the beachfront. The idea was to have so many people get ashore at one time that anybody watching the beach wouldn't be able to put up effective resistance.

The maneuver worked as planned, and the meager two patrolling soldiers were taken down and disarmed without them getting a chance to notify anyone.

They were stripped of any communications devices and weapons, then cuffed and left with a guard to watch over them while the rest of the team got on with the mission.

They leapfrogged from cover to cover, making their way closer to the buildings.

Shifter reconnaissance had confirmed the mercenary soldiers were being housed in one of the outbuildings while only the mage and her immediate staff were in the mansion.

Half the assembled forces would be going to the outbuilding to deal with the soldiers while the other half cleared the mansion.

Zeke and the Santinis were bringing up the rear of the group heading for the mansion.

When the mage was located, it would be up to the master chief and his granddaughter, backed up by everyone else, to exact justice under shifter law.

Which, Zeke had learned, meant blood for blood.

In other words, the mage would die for what she had done to Celine's parents, and all

her other victims. Zeke didn't mind that outcome at all, and if necessary, he'd be happy to step in and give them a hand.

He still didn't like the idea that Celine would be in danger, but he knew he had to let this happen. He had to back her up and let her stand on her own legs, facing down her fears and the boogie man—or woman, in this case—who had destroyed her family and sent her life into turmoil.

Wil, true to his word, brought the fog. With that as cover, they were able to approach the mansion much more rapidly.

There wasn't a lot of cover around the building itself, but with the dense fog that Wil was able to call, it didn't matter.

The forward units were already inside the mansion, clearing it room by room.

Zeke was listening to their progress over his tactical radio, as was the master chief.

When the magic started flying, Zeke knew that the mage had been found.

The three of them started running toward the sound of sizzling fire bolts and an unfortunate scream from one of the shifter soldiers who had gotten too close to the mage.

Noting the man writhing in pain in passing, Zeke realized his comrades were already seeing to his care.

A large patch of his clothing had been burned away, and the skin underneath damaged badly.

Zeke tried not to let his eyebrows rise too high. Though he'd seen it in visions, he'd

never quite realized the damage a mage bolt could do to someone's flesh. He reminded himself again to stay out of the line of fire, if at all possible, and make sure Celine and her grandfather did the same.

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Celine almost couldn't believe that the moment was nearly at hand. She was running down the corridor of the fancy mansion, trailing after her grandfather who had taken point , as the soldiers called it. Zeke was bringing up the rear, following close behind her, his weapon held at the ready.

She didn't have a weapon. She was the weapon.

She might not have claws and teeth like her lion cousins, but seals had a little extra magic, and a lot of secrets that they didn't reveal, even to their shifter kin.

There was a very good reason that the Navy SEALs had originated with selkies.

Seal shifters had a lot more going for them, magically speaking, than most people realized.

She might not be a trained soldier, but her wild side had the killer instinct and knew how to hunt. And how to evade.

It was her particular brand of wild magic that made her brave enough to face down the mage who had killed her parents.

The only reason that mage had gotten the drop on her parents was because she'd taken them by surprise.

They had never expected an ambush within their own home.

If they had been the least bit prepared, the woman would never have been able to kill

them both.

Celine had taken time to prepare for this moment. She'd been building up to this for almost a year now. She was ready to face the woman who had taken the people she'd loved most from her. The mage would pay for what she had done.

Suddenly, her grandfather stopped running and began creeping towards the corner in the wide hallway. Celine stopped and listened to her senses. Yes. That had to be her. Right around the corner, the mage was waiting for them.

Celine met her grandfather's eyes, and they both nodded understanding. He knew her capabilities, which was why he hadn't denied her desire to be on this mission.

"Do your thing, pumpkin," her grandfather said in the gentlest of tones that did not carry beyond the three of them.

Celine was aware that Zeke was standing at her shoulder.

She glanced back at him and wasn't too surprised to find a massive lion stalking up behind them.

It seemed her cousin Liam had decided to join them in his shifted form.

Depending on how difficult the mage was to deal with, he might come in handy.

Celine nodded to him, and Zeke turned to look over his shoulder.

Celine almost cracked a smile at the way Zeke's eyes widened when he caught sight of the giant jungle king sitting like a house cat right behind him.

"She's around the corner waiting for us," Celine whispered into Zeke's ear, moving

close to him. “I’m going to do something. Just stay behind me unless Gramps says otherwise. I can handle this. I promise you.”

Zeke looked like he wanted to argue, but she didn’t give him a chance. She moved away, drawing on her inner power, then moving her hands in a ritualistic fashion, pulling out the shield from her inner core of magic that would protect them all while they faced down the evil mage.

Zeke felt something buzzing through the air.

Like the gathering of electrical charge right before a lightning strike.

He’d become more familiar with that sensation since Wil had gained his power over the weather, and lightning in particular.

But this was slightly different. The flavor of it felt somehow more...

ancient...or something. He couldn’t quite put his finger on it.

But as amazed as he was by the freaking lion that was now bringing up the rear of their small group, he was even more startled when Celine started doing some kind of magic.

She was the source of the buzz in the air.

And as she pulled her hands apart like she was stretching some sort of imaginary taffy, he felt the buzz spread over him.

It felt protective, though he couldn’t explain why he thought that.

Was it some kind of shield? Some kind of magical force field?

He really didn't know enough about magic yet to understand what he was feeling and seeing, but it did seem like magic, and he hadn't known that Celine had that sort of ability. He'd figured she was just a shifter, though there was no just about being a shapeshifter, of course.

Zeke held his breath as Celine stepped around the corner.

Santini went with her, as did Zeke and the giant lion.

The mage saw them and went nuts. That's the only way he could describe it.

The woman's face twisted up in a mask of rage as she raised her arms and threw all kinds of energy bolts at them.

Zeke would have ducked, but somehow, he knew that whatever Celine had done, it wouldn't allow any of that nasty, blood-red energy to reach them.

She advanced, step-by-step, toward the mage.

Celine's confidence grew as the other woman's poise diminished.

The mage was cornered, the wide hallway having no outlet except a window at one end and doors on either side that led to other rooms in the house.

But she would never make it to any of those doors.

Not if they had anything to say about it.

"You killed my parents." Celine's voice was strong as she advanced on the mage who kept trying to use her own power to break through Celine's shield, to no avail.

“You killed my son and daughter-in-law.” Santini’s voice spoke judgment as he walked beside his granddaughter.

Celine spoke again. “Under shifter law, your life is forfeit, and we’ve come to serve justice on your soul.”

Zeke felt like there was power in the ritualistic words. The mage’s eyes went wide with fear and desperation as they stalked closer to her. Her magic seemed to have no effect on Celine or anyone behind her magical barrier.

The mage’s crimson-tipped nails were shaped into claws that glistened in the faint light of dawn just coming in through the window at the far end of the hall. A cruel smile curved her lips as Celine stepped even closer.

Zeke scanned the space between the mage and the far end of the hall where the window shone brightly.

She was edging back toward it, as if she was going to try to jump out, but they wouldn’t allow her the chance.

Then he spotted some odd scuff marks on the floor in places.

Instinct took over. He took off one glove and reached out so that his fingers brushed the cold surface of the wall.

A vision slammed into him of the mage’s movements earlier that day, or perhaps the day before.

She’d gone around and moved things, doing incantations, setting spells in this hallway.

He saw what the walls had seen and the exact spots she'd set up to strike.

She'd chosen this hallway for a last stand.

Insurance against being taken completely off guard.

They were on the ground floor of the mansion, so a little hop over the windowsill, and she'd be in the garden. Free to make her getaway.

"There are magical traps all over the place. Parts of this hallway are rigged to strike anyone who gets too close," Zeke said loudly so everyone would hear.

The mage cursed as Zeke opened his eyes and let go of the wall.

He put his black glove back on and stared right back at the woman.

He read hatred in her eyes, just before they began glowing red, and she renewed her attacks, edging farther back in the hall.

She was going for the window, and they were going to have to let her go.

Or...maybe not.

The mage backed toward the window as magic flew, sending ropes of concentrated fire to batter against Celine's shield. She was standing strong for now, but she looked angry, and a hint of strain was showing around her eyes. At least to Zeke.

He looked at the master chief, who was brandishing his weapon but holding his fire.

Santini had warned Zeke that conventional bullets would probably have little to no effect on a mage of this caliber.

Zeke turned when the lion's tail deliberately brushed his arm, and he realized the lion was warning him that he was leaving.

Zeke would have to watch their backs as Liam, in lion form, went off on some other mission.

Zeke hoped he was going around to the back of the mansion. Hopefully, he'd be organizing a welcoming party for the mage on the back lawn if she made it out that window.

Which was becoming more likely by the moment. Dammit .

Zeke tuned in his tactical radio as his teammates began reporting in.

The men who'd gone after the soldiers reported that the mercenaries had been secured, and the members of his unit had been ordered to the mansion to help with the mage situation.

There was more than just the woman Celine and her grandfather were after.

Magic battles had broken out in several locations in the mansion.

They'd have to figure out later who all these people were, but none had the level of power of the woman who was getting closer and closer to that window.

Zeke asked for very specific help from his comrades as the situation went critical. It was a standoff between the selkies and the mage, but perhaps some of Zeke's friends could help alter that balance of power. Two, in particular, had skills that could help right now.

Zeke kept watch behind the selkies while he talked low into his radio and received

confirmation of his plan.

First, lightning striking very close to that window signaled Wil's arrival, and a brief countdown preceded the appearance of Dan as he walked right through the far wall, startling the mage.

He tried to take her down with a quick blow to the temple, but she ducked out of the way.

She was stunned a bit, but not knocked out, so Dan exercised caution and ran back out through the wall before she could strike him down.

That was some freaky power he had, Zeke had to admit.

But the distraction was enough. Celine and Santini advanced on the mage, getting within touching distance. But there was a trap nearby, and Zeke had to warn them.

"Don't let her get past the pillar. That's the trigger for one of her traps," he warned Santini in an urgent voice, but it was clear Celine had heard him too.

With a grunt of frustration, Celine dove for the mage and grabbed her by the throat. She was still stunned just enough to allow Celine's move. They both fell to the carpeted floor as Santini stood over them.

Zeke was surprised that the master chief didn't move to help, but it looked like Celine had the matter well in hand.

The mage tried to fight her off, but Celine was stronger.

She might look like a waif, but she was a shifter, with all the physical strength that implied.

It was pure luck that the mage got a leg between them and shoved Celine off, but Santini was there, and he put a bullet between the woman's eyes, quick and neat.

Up close and personal. Ending her life, and her dark, sinister magic.

"I thought conventional ammo didn't have an effect on magic users," Zeke said, speaking the first thought that came to his mind as the master chief raised his weapon with grim satisfaction in his eyes.

"It's no good for distance, but very few creatures on this earth can come back from a bullet between the eyes at point blank range." Santini offered Celine a hand up from where she'd fallen on the floor. He gave her a quick hug, but they were still in a battle zone and needed to stay sharp.

"Good to know," Zeke replied, shaking his head. Santini was every bit as awesome as his legend, now that Zeke had seen him in action.

Zeke reported the death of the main target over his radio and received a recall order from Hal.

He was to get the Santinis back to the boat, now that their job was done.

The rest of the troops would be mopping up everything else, particularly the mercenaries, who would not be going anywhere anytime soon.

The shifters had made provisions for where to keep them until they could be sorted out and sent far, far away.

For now, Zeke's job was done, and he'd accomplished it with a little help from his friends. He'd have to remember to buy Wil and Dan a beer next time they had a night off. He owed them both for their timely distractions.

“We’re ordered to fall back to the transport,” Zeke told Celine.

Silence fell in the hall as they both looked down at the body of the mage who had caused them so much grief.

The roar of a lion could be heard outside, but it was in the distance.

Liam had gone into battle somewhere else on the large estate, but Zeke would have to figure that out later.

For now, Zeke reached out to Celine. She looked like she was in shock.

“You okay?”

Celine swallowed hard, nodding as tears shimmered in her eyes, but she stood tall.

“They can rest now,” she said, dignity in every word and motion. She looked tired. Drained, but also relieved. Santini put his hand on her shoulder.

“You did good, pumpkin. They’d both be very proud of you for holding the line so well and being so strong. They are avenged,” Santini intoned, and Celine nodded, her eyes brimming with tears that didn’t quite fall.

“Should we try to search her?” Zeke asked, wondering if there was further evidence they could collect.

“Better leave that to some proper mages. We have contact with a few ancient and powerful witches locally, who can do the job once we’ve secured the place,” Santini said, turning back the way they’d come. It was clear he was ready to leave, and Celine followed suit.

As the three of them walked back down the wide hall, Zeke glanced at Celine, pride swelling in his chest. She hadn't been consumed by anger or revenge.

She'd claimed justice. She'd done so with dignity and control, and had powers he hadn't even known existed.

She was amazing. And damn, if he wasn't completely in love with her.

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Mission accomplished, they headed back to the boats.

Once aboard, Zeke kept watch while Celine and her grandfather hugged for a long moment.

Both were understandably emotional, though the master chief kept it low-key while Celine let the tears fall silently down her cheeks.

Zeke wanted nothing more than to be the one comforting her, but he understood the shared grief they both felt, and it was important to keep an eye on their surroundings while the two Santinis let their emotions out for a quiet moment.

Zeke kept an eye on the shoreline and the water, as well as listening to the mop up reports over his tactical radio.

Everyone they knew about had been accounted for, and the shifters were setting up shop to deal with the fallout.

They would man the estate for a few hours while they dealt with prisoner transport and arranged for their local magical contacts to come in and examine the place.

Zeke hoped he'd find out the results of those examinations, but he wasn't sure if he'd be kept in the loop.

It was enough to know the mage who had hurt Celine so badly had been brought to justice.

He felt really good about that, and about the role he'd been able to play in averting disaster.

Sitting there in that boat, awaiting further orders while watching over the woman he'd come to love and her legendary grandfather, he realized that the gift he'd been given by that ancient djinn wasn't so lame after all.

In fact, the more he learned how to use it, the better off he'd be.

Today's mission had proved that to him beyond a shadow of a doubt.

It might not be the showiest of abilities, but it certainly had come in handy when needed. He'd redouble his efforts to learn how to best use it.

While he was thinking those deep thoughts, a sleek black head rose out of the water a few yards off the stern of the boat he was sitting in.

He checked his instinctual raise of his weapon when he realized it was a seal, showing its wide black eyes and playful face.

Zeke glanced over at the master chief and saw him nod at the seal, then look at Zeke.

"One of yours?" Zeke asked quietly, though he thought he already knew the answer.

"Yeah. There's a platoon of them out there in the water, watching for trouble. That check-in was to say that nothing's been spotted," Santini replied.

"Good to know." Zeke was impressed all over again by the shifters and their abilities.

As if her grandfather's voice had broken Celine out of her grief, she straightened away from the big man and wiped her cheeks. A moment later, she looked at Zeke.

“You were so incredibly helpful in there, Zeke,” she whispered, nudging her chin toward the mansion in the distance. “Thank you.”

“No thanks necessary,” he assured her. “I’m just glad I was there to back you up. And I’m damned impressed by what you were able to do. I didn’t realize selkies had that kind of magic.”

“Not all of us do,” Santini said, patting his granddaughter on the shoulder. “Celine is one of the special ones who has an extra dose of protective magic.”

“Well, it was amazing. And unexpected,” Zeke replied, still keeping an eye on their surroundings even as they chatted, working out some of the adrenaline that had peaked during the confrontation with the mage. It would take some time to come down off that high.

“As was your timely warning,” Santini reminded him. “If I haven’t said it before, that’s one useful little gift you have there, son.”

Zeke nodded slowly. “I didn’t think so before, but after all this, I’m starting to realize its value.”

“Well, it’s about time,” Celine said, smiling softly for the first time since the battle.

Zeke didn’t get a chance to reply as his radio came alive with the order for his unit to retreat.

In the next minutes, most of the boats were filling again with the members of his unit who were scattered among a portion of the shifter troops.

The rest of the shifters would stay on the estate a little longer to conclude matters there.

They were headed back to base not long after, the boats a little lighter than when they'd gone in, but every heart pleased at the outcome.

There had been a few injuries, but nothing life-threatening.

At least, nothing that Rick couldn't handle.

Shifters were able to heal most superficial wounds quickly, taking only a little longer for the more serious ones.

But there were a couple of guys that needed Rick's help to overcome the worst of their injuries without significant downtime or permanent loss of dexterity.

No matter how much Zeke was becoming accustomed to dealing with magic, shifters still managed to amaze him on a regular basis.

Particularly after witnessing what Celine had done during the battle.

He wouldn't talk openly about it without her permission, he decided.

From what her grandfather had said, her ability was special even among shifters, and he'd gotten the distinct impression that selkies liked to be even more mysterious than the other shifters he'd met so far. He could respect that.

When they got back to the island base, it was a bit of a letdown.

Zeke still had all that adrenaline running through him, as did most of the guys, though they had witnessed different parts of the wide-ranging battle scene.

They would all make full reports later in the day, but for right now, the mission had been accomplished, and their orders were to rest and recuperate.

It was nearing lunchtime, so everybody gravitated first to their quarters, to put away their gear and maybe hit the showers, then they wandered down to the cafeteria.

Master Chief Santini's crew had worked without him, preparing a victory buffet.

Special dishes had been included with specific soldiers in mind, as a treat.

A lot of their favorites were on display, ready for consumption.

It was a thoughtful gesture that the men appreciated.

They ate quietly, each thinking over the mission.

Some had used their new skills a bit more than others, working together as part of a team for the first time in ages.

From the overall tone of the quiet conversation, it was clear that everyone had enjoyed flexing their new magical muscles, so to speak, as part of a bigger force.

Unlike other missions, the men of the unit had been inserted into platoons of shifter soldiers.

A few here. A few there. Each contributing their own special skill to whatever those groups were assigned to accomplish.

The plan had worked even better than anyone had expected.

Which boded well for the future of the unit.

Or at least, the men within it. They had proven today that they didn't have to function as a complete unit, but their skills could be utilized in conjunction with other special

troops.

And by special, Zeke was thinking specifically about shifters and those with knowledge of the magical world around them.

He wasn't sure what that meant for the cohesion of the unit in the future.

It was possible they could be split up and moved around like chess pieces.

He wasn't sure he liked the idea of that, but he was a soldier, and he was sworn to do his duty and follow orders wherever they led him.

He had a feeling, from the way they all shied away from talk of the future, that a lot of his colleagues were thinking the same.

This morning's adventure had been an eye-opener in a lot of ways.

On the one hand, it was good to know they could work well with others using their new abilities.

On the other, they had just proven that they could be split up and moved around with little loss of effectiveness.

Zeke had gotten so used to working with the men of his unit that they were like family. It would be hard to break up the team. But they all knew, if that's what Uncle Sam wanted, that's what they were going to have to do. Whether they liked it or not.

But, hopefully, not for a while yet. They were all still under threat.

They'd taken out one key mage this morning, but there were others still out there gunning for them.

Armando Salazar, Abdul Kettering, the other two female mages who had been working with the one they'd cornered that morning...

Not to mention the Venifucus . There were still quite a few enemies out there.

And he couldn't leave out the foreign agents who kept targeting the unit, trying to kidnap them and hurt their families.

Until some of that settled down, Zeke figured they wouldn't be going anywhere, except for short forays like this morning's. All along, they had been doing small missions to safeguard their families and loved ones, but this morning's mission had been a lot larger and involved a lot more troops.

Maybe it was a turning point. Maybe they'd be able to do more missions like that now they had proven themselves able to work well with others. Zeke didn't know. And he wasn't sure anybody really knew the answer to that just yet. If Jeeves and Rose knew, they were keeping it to themselves.

The brass would decide what they wanted, and those plans were way above Zeke's pay grade. Hopefully, the officers making the decisions would take into account how well the unit functioned as a fighting force...and a family.

Lunch was both celebratory and subdued, each man a little lost in his thoughts, which was to be expected after such an adventure. Rick was still with the shifters since there was at least one wounded soldier that still needed his special healing touch.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:43 pm

Celine had gone somewhere with her grandfather, and the cafeteria was still being run by his second-in-command.

Zeke understood. It was important to take time to decompress after action, and both of the Santinis had grief to deal with as well.

Today had been the culmination of a year of anguish for them both after the loss of Celine's parents.

They probably needed some time to process all of that.

Zeke just wanted to be there for Celine. He knew her grandfather needed her too, especially in their shared grief, but he hoped she'd seek him out as well. He just had to be patient.

They had a full-scale debrief scheduled for later that afternoon, and he hoped he would see her there. Zeke had already heard that some of the shifters would be present at the meeting, so he had hopes she would be one of them.

And then, after the meeting was over... Well, he had hopes that they could spend some quality time together.

He wanted to feel her out and see if maybe there was the slightest possibility of her returning his feelings.

He'd realized today—though it had been building for a while—that he was head over heels in love with her.

He just wasn't sure if she felt the same.

He had been told that, for shifters, it was an all-or-nothing proposition.

Either a person was their mate, or they weren't.

And mates were a rare thing, apparently.

Just one fated mate for every shifter, and most of them spent a long time searching for that perfect One.

Many never found their mate, which was tragic.

Zeke didn't know exactly how it all worked, but he felt it deep in his bones that Celine was the woman for him. If only she felt the same...

*

Celine followed her grandfather's lead when they returned to the island base.

She almost would've rather gone with Zeke, but she needed to be there for Gramps.

He might be a big tough soldier, but he had lost his son and daughter-in-law.

They had shared their grief this past year and grown even closer than they had been before.

He'd given her a place to live and work that was safe, and he had looked after her.

It was hard to believe that their search for justice was finally over.

After all this time, the mage who had killed her parents was finally dead.

Both Celine and her grandfather had gotten a chance to battle with the woman, which helped satisfy their wild sides.

In fact, after returning to the island, they'd gone straight to the shore and let their seals out to swim with their friends and family members.

It was cleansing, and a way to let the worries of the human side go for a little while, and just swim in the ocean surrounded by friends and family.

After that, Celine went back to her barracks and cleaned up a bit.

She had hugged her grandfather for a long time before they parted, and he had praised her again for her part in the morning's action.

She might not be a trained soldier, but she was a shifter, and she knew how to fight.

In addition, she had that little bit of extra magic that she didn't have to use very often, but it came in really handy when it was needed.

Among her Clan, she was a protector. Her shielding magic was something that could keep others safe, as well as herself, and she'd used it a few times in dangerous situations in the past. Nothing like what she'd done today.

Mostly, she had used it in the ocean to protect herself and anyone who happened to be swimming with her against predators.

Which was why, when the Clan gathered, she was always a favorite to go swimming with the youngsters.

She could protect them like no other from all kinds of threats.

Once she was clean and had changed her clothes, she realized it was almost time for the big meeting her grandfather had told her about.

She made her way back to the barracks that the Army guys were using and grabbed a quick sandwich in the kitchen.

She had missed lunch but didn't want to go to the meeting hungry because her grandfather had warned her it might take a while to go over the events of the morning.

He'd also intimated that they might have a surprise guest at the meeting.

Someone who might shake things up for all of them in the very near future.

"Things are going to have to change now, pumpkin," her grandfather had said before leaving her earlier in the day.

"Because the enemy knows about this base?"

He tapped her on the nose, smiling gently.

"You always were a smart one. Yes, this place has served its purpose, but we always knew it could never be permanent. At some point, our enemies would figure out where we were operating from, and we'd have to move again.

There are contingency plans in place, but the presence of the Army guys changes things a little bit.

When we made our plans, we didn't even know they existed.

And I think you probably have some decisions to make.

When we go, you are more than welcome to come with me, but if I'm not much mistaken, there might be another option open to you that could be even more attractive than spending more time with your old grandpa.

” He teased her, ruffling her hair before turning away and leaving her at the barracks door.

He hadn't given her a chance to respond.

She didn't even know how she would have responded.

Things were still a bit up in the air between herself and Zeke, if that's what her cagey old grandfather had been alluding to.

She just needed to find out what Zeke was feeling.

She couldn't make any decisions until she knew if they were meant to be together forever, like her inner seal was insisting more with each passing day.

The meeting had almost started by the time Celine finished her hasty lunch.

Luckily, it was being held in the cafeteria, since it was the biggest room they had with seating for the shifter soldiers who were also joining the meeting.

Celine sat by her grandfather. He'd waved her over, having saved her a seat next to him.

She saw Zeke and smiled at him, but he was all business, even though she saw his eyes soften a bit when he looked at her. It was enough for now. Later, she promised

herself, she'd get to spend some time with him. Her soul needed that. So badly.

She turned her attention to the main door when everybody stood to attention.

A man she'd never seen before walked in with Lester Kinkaid at his side.

The man's uniform was fancier than any other she'd ever seen, and he was wearing what she thought might be an admiral's insignia, though she wasn't an expert.

The way everybody in the room deferred to him, though, was clue enough. One of the Top Brass had arrived.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:43 pm

Zeke was just about floored when he saw an admiral walk into the room.

And this wasn't just any admiral. This was the legendary Admiral Morrow, who was in charge of all the extra special units that were part of the Special Forces.

Basically, he dealt with all the weird shit.

The shifters, and the magical folk like Hal and Zeke, and their entire unit.

They hadn't even known this admiral before everything had changed for them in Babylon.

But once their chain of command became aware of the freaky stuff going down with them, they'd been moved over to Admiral Morrow's command with all due haste.

They'd had one group meeting with the man before being stationed here, though Zeke supposed Hal was in more regular contact with the guy, since he was the one calling the shots for their unit and everyone on this base.

Zeke hadn't expected to see him here though. What he'd thought was going to be a routine after-action debrief had just turned into something else. What that turned out to be, he was curious to find out.

"At ease, everyone," Morrow said, motioning for everybody to sit down again as he stood at the front of the room, bracketed by Lester on one side and Hal on the other.

"First, let me congratulate you all on the outstanding work you did this morning, and

my condolences to the master chief and his granddaughter. I'm very glad you were able to achieve justice for your loved ones, all while uncovering so much vital information that we didn't have before. ”

Here, the admiral nodded to Celine and her grandfather, who were sitting nearby. The master chief nodded back, looking very comfortable with the admiral. Zeke wondered if the two of them had history. He'd just bet they did.

“Unfortunately, the secrecy of this base is blown. You neutralized the immediate threat, but the enemy is now aware of this place, as we expected would happen sooner or later, so we're going to have to execute the evacuation plan.

I've already begun that process over on the administrative side on my way to this meeting.

They're packing up and will be out of here by tomorrow.

The rest of you will be given your duty assignments once we leave here, and there will be a planned period where the shifter troops will be split up among several bases around the country, and a few of the larger ships.

If we get away clean, we can begin reconvening at another location in due course.

I'll be coordinating that directly, and you will all be notified when and where to move later this afternoon. ”

There was a bit of shuffling among the shifters, but nobody objected.

Not that they really could. This admiral held power over everyone in this room, except maybe Celine, Zeke thought.

He wondered where she would end up. A sudden pang of trepidation went through him at the thought.

If he had anything to say about it, he hoped she would come with him, wherever he ended up.

The admiral had yet to say what they were going to do with the Army contingent.

“As for the Army unit, we’ll discuss your options after this meeting. You’ll stay once the shifter troops are dismissed,” the admiral ordered, looking directly at Hal, who replied immediately.

“Yes, sir.”

Hal was probably just as curious of the rest of them about where they might end up after all of this, but he managed to hide his impatience. The admiral would get to them in his own good time, but at least he had promised to get to them. They just had to get through the rest of this meeting first.

The rest of the agenda went as Zeke had expected.

They examined the action of the morning step-by-step, and each group outlined what had happened in their area of the estate.

The admiral surprised Zeke with his astute questions and quick grasp of the situation.

Admiral Morrow was rumored to be no slouch, and Zeke was pleased to see that his reputation was accurate.

As the meeting began to wrap up, Admiral Morrow had a few more things to say.

It was clear that everyone in the room respected this man more than almost any other officer Zeke had ever seen.

There was also a rumor that the man had magic of his own, and now that Zeke had seen him again, he suspected that rumor might have more than a grain of truth to it.

The shifters all seemed to be in awe of the guy, that was for sure.

“Look, although you had a victory today, we all know the danger isn’t over.

Kettering is still out there. So are the other two mages and Salazar.

And the entire damned Venifucus , when it comes right down to it.

Not to mention the Destroyer, herself. But those are all battles for the future.

For tonight, we have peace, and you people have brought that about.

Embrace it. Celebrate it. Enjoy it for all it’s worth.

Tomorrow, things are going to change, but we all know change is inevitable, and hopefully in time, you’ll all be together again. ”

Admiral Morrow impressed Zeke and everybody in the room with that speech, and as he dismissed the shifters, they all saluted him with respect before leaving the room.

Celine went with them, escorted out by her grandfather.

Zeke caught her eye briefly and hoped she realized he would look for her later.

He wanted to see her tonight more than ever.

Especially if she was going to be leaving the island tomorrow.

He had things to say to her. Questions to ask.

Discoveries to make. Most of all, he needed to know if she loved him or not.

Tonight might be his only chance to find out before everybody was scattered all over the place.

She acknowledged him with a brief nod and a sweet smile as she walked out of the room.

He would hunt her down later. He had to.

He had no other choice. He couldn't leave things unsaid between them.

At the very least, he had to tell her how much he loved her.

Even though the thought of doing that gave him the heebie-jeebies.

Once the room had been cleared of all civilians and Navy personnel, the admiral got right to the point. They had reshuffled the seating so that everyone was at one big table, the admiral seated next to Hal.

“When we made our contingency plans, you guys were not taken into account. I didn't have command over your unit, and frankly, your unit hadn't undergone the change that makes you so valuable and different,” the admiral revealed, sighing.

“As a result, we don't really have a plan in place for you.

What we do have, are options. I'll be honest with you all.

Nobody quite knows what to do with you. You're not shifters.

You're not the regular sort of magic users.

You're not really anything any of us have ever dealt with before, but you are proving to be incredibly resourceful and useful.

I, personally, don't want to lose that. I don't want to lose you, because I think there was a reason that sneaky old djinn gifted you with your special powers.

And I think you all are going to play a crucial role in the upcoming battles against evil.

The thing is, I'm not sure you can continue to do that under the auspices of the Army.
”

The admiral let that thought sink in for a minute.

As Zeke looked around the table, it was clear nobody really knew what to make of that statement.

What would they do if they couldn't be in the Army anymore?

And how would they still be available for use as a unit—especially to a Navy Admiral—if they were no longer in the military?

“My Army counterpart is in favor of letting you all go. Honorable discharges with all due thanks of the U.S. Army and all that. He's a bit, shall we say, shortsighted.

He also doesn't understand the whole magic thing and has not been made aware of the ongoing battle between the followers of Elspeth and those who serve the Light.

He's a good soldier and a brave man. Don't get me wrong.

But he doesn't believe in the unseen world and doesn't seem likely to embrace the fact that magic exists. " The admiral shook his head.

"I've been advocating for keeping you on, but since you're Army and not Navy, the money comes out of his budget, and he's not happy about it.

Especially when I'm the one in command of your unit.

So, if the Army decommissions your unit and you're all cut loose, we lose a valuable asset in the fight against evil.

And, I suspect, if you're all cast out on your own, you won't find an effective way to use your special talents, even if you wanted to continue the fight.

However, there is an alternative. I've been in discussions with the Wraiths about you.

I know some of you have a bit of experience with Major Moore and his band of mercenary shifters based out of Wyoming.

They are willing to offer you and your families shelter on their mountain.

I can say, unequivocally, that recent events have made their location one of the most secure, magically speaking, in the country.

I sincerely doubt any foreign agents would be able to get to you, or your families, if you decide to live there.

" The admiral paused, looking at each of them in turn. Then, he leaned back in his chair.

“This isn’t something you have to decide immediately.

I can float a bit of my budget to keep paying you, and keep you on the books for the next few months, at the very least. However, I would suggest you take that time to check out Wyoming.

I don’t have another secure base to stash you at right now.

It’ll take some time for the shifter troops to go through the various waypoints and then regroup at another location.

Months, not weeks. Just so we can be sure that the next location is as secure as possible.

I’d advise you all to take a little vacation in Wyoming for the next few months.

Get the lay of the land. Meet the people.

See what life is like up on that mountain. Then, make your decision.”

“Question, sir,” Hal asked, when the admiral paused and looked around again. The man nodded, and Hal went on. “I understand you’ll keep our pay going, but what about the study group that’s been helping assess our new abilities? Do they come with us? And will we be tapped to go out on missions?”

“The study group will have to be cut back a bit,” the admiral admitted.

“You’ll still be able to have a few scientists and other specialists helping you discover your abilities, but I suspect Major Moore will want to vet them before allowing them into his territory.

He may also have some resources that could help you better, which is something worth considering.

He has a lot of contacts in the magical world that aren't available to Uncle Sam.

As for missions, I will definitely have need of you.

I also have need of the Wraiths, from time to time.

I have a discretionary budget to pay for such things, though we don't come straight out and call it hiring mercenaries .

I prefer to describe them as special consultants.

Speak to them about it. You may find that working through them will be more profitable to you all in the long run.

I can keep you on your regular pay for now, but as of this moment, by the end of the year, we may have to change that up.

If you find working with the Wraiths acceptable, I can hire you through them.

Unlike my regular troops, you would have a choice over what missions you accept and what missions you turn down.

Though, I'll be honest, the Wraiths never have reason to turn me down.

I know what they'll accept, and I know enough not to ask them to do anything that would go against their core principles.

Frankly, I don't deal in those kinds of missions.

At all. Ever. I'm firmly on the side of Light, and now that you guys are aware of what that means, you'll understand that you'll never have reason to turn down a mission I send you. ”

“Good to know, Admiral. Thank you,” Hal replied when the man eyed him.

“I have open lines of communication with Major Moore. I'll extend the same to you, Hal, until you and your men decide what works best for you.

As you may realize, we need to clear this space as quickly as possible now that the enemy is aware of our position.

Major Moore is awaiting your call tonight to begin a transition plan.

At the very least, you can have that little vacation on his mountain for the next few weeks.

It's a beautiful place and extraordinarily safe.

He can explain it all to you, but it's safer, by far, than even this island.

And your ladies won't be alone. There are many families living there.

Women, children, and an entire werewolf Pack farther down the mountain, headed up by Major Moore's brother.

It's a real family place that just happens to have an elite mercenary group quartered there alongside their families and friends. ”

“Sounds interesting, sir,” Hal said, a quizzical expression on his face. “I've heard about Moore and his men, and I think it's a good plan, if we can't stay here. Thank

you for setting it up.”

“If you decide, down the road, to sign up with the Wraiths, it could be very beneficial to you financially. That’s something else to consider, now that quite a few of you have mates and growing families. Just a thought.” The admiral smiled and stood, and everyone in the room snapped to their feet.

Just like that, the meeting was over, and everything had changed. Hal dismissed them without further ado, and Zeke went out the back door, heading toward the beach. He needed to find his girl. They had a lot to talk about.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:43 pm

Celine left the cafeteria with the rest of her shifter friends alongside her grandfather. The mood was somber, yet satisfied. Justice had been served, and they had won the day, but the underlying loss was still there. Nobody could forget that.

Also, the threat of more fighting to come was ever present.

They'd won this battle, but there were still enemies out there that would be coming for them—if they didn't find the enemy first. Already, people were working on doing just that, she knew.

Shifters, as well as the Army guys with their special powers.

“Will you be all right if I go with them?” Celine's grandfather asked her quietly as they watched the rest of their seal relatives and friends walk away toward their barracks.

Celine suspected her grandfather wanted to thank them all.

She'd done her best to do so but hadn't really been able to speak without choking up just yet, so she'd do that later, when she was a bit more emotionally stable.

Still, the Santini family owed their fellow selkies a debt of thanks for sticking with them through this past year and being there to help at every turn.

It was right and proper that her grandfather talk with them and thank them.

“I'll be okay. Go. Tell them how grateful I am for their help and support. I can't do it

just yet, but I will, when I can talk about it without embarrassing them all with my tears.” She huffed a soft laugh at herself.

Gramps chuckled her under her chin, then leaned in to kiss her hair. “I’ll be around later if you need to talk.”

“I’m just going to walk for a bit, then maybe thank some of those who helped out today, if I can.”

“Including Zeke?” Her grandfather’s gaze was both challenging and teasing.

“Maybe especially Zeke?” she replied, feeling her grandfather out to see what he might think about her getting more deeply involved with the human male.

“He’s a good man,” Gramps replied, his tone going a bit more serious.

She almost breathed a sigh of relief. With those simple words, her grandfather had indicated his approval. She reached out and hugged her grandfather, acknowledging silently the big concession he had just made.

When she’d been younger, it felt like none of the young men she’d dated had ever met with her grandfather’s approval.

She had begun to think that nobody ever would, but she was glad to be proven wrong.

Especially because Zeke felt special to both her human side and her wild side. He felt like forever.

She let her grandfather go and stepped back.

He walked off to join his comrades while she turned toward the shoreline.

She wanted to take that walk and clear her head.

She wanted to commune with nature and maybe think about her parents for a little bit, trying to come to terms with everything that had happened.

It was still sinking in. Justice had been served, and after so long a time waiting for this day, it almost felt unreal.

She began walking along the shore, acknowledging the patrols as they passed her on their circuit around the island, but not really speaking to anyone.

She had a lot of thinking to do, and emotions to assimilate.

It had been a tumultuous day, but in a good way.

At least now, she should be able to get on with her life and put the vendetta behind her.

Her beautiful parents were avenged, and her whole life spread out before her.

What she saw when she looked ahead was a life that had other kinds of beauty in it. Other kinds of love. Other forms of family. A mate. Perhaps children of her own. When she thought about that kind of blessing, she couldn't help but fixate on Zeke.

She wanted Zeke to be the father of her babies. She wanted him to be her forever love. Her mate. Her everything. She just wasn't sure how it would work with him being human.

She knew that shifters regularly mated with humans, but it wasn't something she had personal familiarity with.

The mated pairs she knew were all shifters.

But she had heard true mates could be found among humans.

She just wasn't sure how it all worked. Her heart was fully engaged, but how could she know that he was as deeply committed to her as she was to him? She'd have to take him at his word.

That thought wasn't really as scary as it had been before, when she'd been thinking about this topic in the abstract.

When it came to Zeke, she believed in his integrity, his loyalty, and his honesty.

If he said he felt deeply for her, then she would believe it.

She believed in him . In fact, she loved him.

Thinking that thought all the way through for the first time ever, nearly bowled her over.

There had been so much going on since the moment they'd met that she hadn't really dared let herself analyze the situation fully.

Now she was free to do that, and everything had changed in the best possible way.

She couldn't wait to see him, but by the same token, she was nervous about it.

Did he feel the same? She thought he probably did, but she needed to know for certain before she could think about the rest of her life—their lives—shared together.

But oh, what a beautiful thought.

Zeke found Celine where he suspected she'd be, walking by the water's edge behind his barracks building. She stood barefoot in the surf, letting the waves tickle her feet, washing away the tension of the day.

For a moment, he just watched her—this fierce, beautiful woman who had faced down her demons and won. When she sensed him, she turned, a smile curving her lips.

"I can't believe it's really over," she whispered, her soft voice carrying on the wind.

Zeke couldn't help himself. He walked straight toward her, and she met him halfway, moving right into his arms. He finally felt complete. He finally had the contact he'd needed since seeing her in danger and handling herself with such aplomb.

She'd impressed the hell out of him, and her actions had made him fall even deeper in love with her than he'd been before. Now, all he had to do was find the courage to tell her and ask if she felt the same.

"Were you thinking about diving in and swimming away?" he asked, smiling down at her.

She laughed—a sound that warmed him more than the sun ever could. "Tempting."

He reached out, his fingers trailing down her arm until he clasped her hand. "Stay."

Her smile faltered, emotion welling in her eyes. "I wasn't planning on going anywhere."

"I really like the sound of that," he replied, rubbing his hands over her shoulders and back. She was such a beautiful woman, both inside and out, she almost took his breath away.

Celine leaned into his touch, her hands sliding up his chest as if drawn there by instinct. He felt her fingers curl into the fabric of his shirt, not tugging—just holding on.

“I meant it,” she said softly, lifting her gaze to meet his. “I’m not going anywhere. Not unless you ask me to.”

Zeke’s heart kicked harder. “That’s never going to happen.”

A breeze stirred her hair, tossing a few damp strands across her cheek. He reached up and brushed them back, his fingers lingering at her temple. She turned her face slightly into his palm, her eyes half-lidded, lips parting just enough to make his breath catch.

He leaned in, slow and deliberate, giving her every chance to back away.

She didn’t.

Their lips met gently at first, a whisper of a kiss that made the world fall quiet. Then she pressed closer, and the contact deepened—soft and unhurried but full of promise. Zeke slid one hand into her hair, the other resting at her waist as he pulled her flush against him.

Celine melted into the embrace, wrapping her arms around his neck, and the kiss turned into something that stole the breath from his lungs. She kissed like she did most things—with passion and purpose and nothing held back

When they finally came up for air, her lips were slightly swollen, her eyes luminous in the moonlight.

“I’ve wanted to do that for hours,” he admitted, brushing his nose against hers.

She smiled, a little breathless. “Me too. Ever since... Well, I’ve been thinking about you. A lot. I just wasn’t sure if now was...okay.”

“It’s more than okay.” He pulled her into a tighter hug, resting his chin lightly on her head. “It feels like the first thing that’s really made sense since everything went down.”

She sighed against his chest, the sound content and deeply felt. “You make me feel safe.”

He tilted her chin up gently, forcing her to meet his eyes. “You are safe, Celine. With me. You’re not alone anymore.”

Her eyes shone—not with tears, but with the kind of clarity that came when fear gave way to hope. “Good,” she whispered. “Because I think I’ve already fallen for you, and it would really suck if that was one-sided.”

Zeke froze for just a second, then his smile bloomed—slow, full, and radiant. “You have no idea how relieved I am to hear that.”

She laughed softly, and he kissed her again—deeper this time, pouring everything he felt into the connection. A gentle breeze wrapped around them, the ocean lapping at the nearby shore, warm and rhythmic. Above them, the stars wheeled slowly across the sky, watching over them.

Zeke knew this moment would live in his memory forever. Not because of the kiss, or the moonlight, or the stillness of the beach, but because it was the first time he truly believed they might have a future. Together. He bent to kiss her again.

Celine’s lips were soft under his, pliant and welcoming, but there was steel beneath the sweetness. There was a passion he’d felt before, only with her, that bloomed

between them like a spark conflagrating into a wildfire.

She rose on her toes, pressing against him with full-body certainty, and Zeke groaned into her mouth, his hands sliding down the curve of her back to steady her against him.

Every part of his awareness had narrowed to her.

The taste of her. The heat of her. The feel of her body aligning with his like a puzzle piece he hadn't realized was missing until now.

She broke the kiss only long enough to breathe. Her eyes were dark, pupils wide, cheeks flushed. "We should...probably not do this here."

Zeke brushed his lips along her jaw, trailing heat down to the sensitive spot just below her ear. "No one's around. Everyone's either asleep or celebrating, and the patrol just passed when I joined you. They won't circuit back around for at least a half hour. Maybe more."

Her hands slipped beneath the hem of his shirt, splaying across his bare skin. "You're not playing fair."

"I'm not trying to play fair," he murmured, nipping lightly at her earlobe, and she shivered in his arms.

When she tugged at his shirt in earnest, he let her pull it over his head. The night air kissed his skin, but the contrast of her touch burned hotter. She pressed her hands to his chest, nails grazing just enough to leave him breathless.

"There's a blanket back there," she said, glancing toward the grassy bank above the sand.

He'd grabbed one from the barracks when he'd come down to the beach and dropped it up on the dune. Maybe he hadn't known this would happen, but some part of him had hoped. Needed.

They went over to where he'd dropped the blanket, and he picked it up, unfolding it.

He then spread it on a flat patch of sand hidden somewhat by the tall dune grass.

Celine sank down onto it with him, straddling his lap without hesitation.

Moonlight painted her skin in silver and shadow, the sheer beauty of her stealing what little breath he had left.

She bent to kiss him again, slower this time.

It was a decadent kiss that made him feel all sorts of sensations he'd only ever felt with her.

Celine's hands moved over him like a sculptor learning every line of his form, and he let her, content to be the object of her discovery.

When she pulled back enough to look at him, her expression turned serious.

"I'm not made for casual," she whispered. "Not with you."

His heart kicked hard. "Neither am I."

She nodded, as if she'd needed to hear it. Then she reached for the hem of her top and pulled it off in one smooth motion.

And Zeke forgot how to breathe.

He touched her with reverence, letting his hands roam her back, her hips, the curve of her thighs as she settled against him. Every movement was a promise, every kiss a vow. There was no hurry. Just heat, slow and pulsing, building between them like the tide rising against the shore.

He stroked her thighs with his hands, letting her undress them both. Allowing her to control these moments between them. Giving her whatever she needed of this night. A night after a day of so much tumult, trauma and resolution to long-held issues.

She touched him everywhere, grasping his length and stroking his dick in a way that made him gasp. She was relentless. Wild. Needy.

And he was there to give her whatever she wanted. Always.

He stroked her tits, playing with her nipples before sucking them into his mouth, alternating until she moaned softly and ran her fingers into his hair, holding him to her. Then, she positioned herself over him and sank down onto his hardness with an abrupt motion that made him catch his breath.

Yes. That's exactly where he wanted to be. Inside her. One, with his love.

Being together, like this, was as natural as breathing.

As necessary. They moved as one, the rhythm of the nearby ocean matching the push and pull of their bodies.

Her fingers tangled in his hair, her breath hot against his shoulder as they crested and fell, over and over, until there was nothing left but stars above and salt-kissed skin pressed tightly together in the dark.

She felt so good around him, and when she clenched in climax, he could do no other

than follow her over the precipice. Falling together into bliss.

Afterward, she lay curled against him, her head on his chest, her fingers tracing slow, lazy patterns over his ribs.

“I love the way you touch me,” she murmured.

He smiled into her hair. “I love you .”

She stiffened for a half-second, then melted, pressing a kiss to his chest.

“I was afraid to say it first,” she admitted. “But I’ve been feeling it for a while now.”

Zeke closed his eyes, his arms tightening around her.

“Good,” he whispered. “Because I’m not letting you go.”

The wind picked up a bit, turning colder as the night drew on, but neither of them moved. Not yet. Not when the inky sky watched over them with its infinite twinkling stars, and their hearts were finally, and completely, full.

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They snuggled for a few minutes, then put their clothes back on in consideration of the cooler wind that continued to blow.

But neither of them seemed willing to go back to the barracks just yet.

They lay on the blanket, fully clothed but snuggled together, under the stars as the ocean whispered nearby.

It was an idyllic night, and Celine was enchanted—and fulfilled—after their quick joining and her mind-blowing climax.

Not to mention the fact that they'd both declared their love for each other. She couldn't ignore that, but she had to go that one step further. That final clarification that would let her know if this was the forever love she'd searched for all her life.

"I think..." she whispered, her head on his chest as they lay together. "I think you might be my mate."

Zeke stilled under her. She shifted her head up so she could see his face. His eyes were wide, and it felt like the air between them was suddenly charged. She waited, holding her breath. Then slowly—so slowly—his mouth curved into a smile that stole her breath all over again.

"Good," he said. "Because I already knew you were mine."

Happiness filled her wild heart, but she had to make sure.

“Someone explained to you exactly what that means, right?” She felt a bit hesitant as their gazes held.

“Mating is forever. There will never be anyone else for me, Zeke. Only you. It’s a bond deeper than human marriage.

It’s a soul thing. A permanent joining of our lives and our magic.

Once we’re mates, there is no turning back.

” She didn’t know how to make it any clearer, but he wasn’t pulling away. Thanks be to the Mother of All.

“I understand, babe, and I’m in it for the duration. I love you, and I don’t ever want to be parted from you.”

Her heart swelled with emotion as a sort of giddiness filled her veins with champagne bubbles of happiness. This was it. The moment all doubt fled. She lifted up to kiss him, claiming his lips in a kiss of pure joy and deep passion.

She would’ve taken it further, undressing them both again, but for the knowledge that the patrols would be back around any second now, and it really had gotten a lot colder out here in the past half hour.

Maybe they should move this party indoors, but for now, she was content to enjoy this moment under the stars, with the man she would love forever.

Zeke kissed her like a man claiming his future.

If he had anything to say about it, that’s exactly what he was doing.

He wasn't sure how it was all going to work out with his commitment to the Army and everything that was up in the air right now, but he'd work it out.

Ultimately, he would make it so he and Celine could live happily ever after.

It just might take a little while to bring that about.

When they finally parted, foreheads pressed together, Celine whispered, "So...what now, soldier?"

Zeke sighed as she returned to his side, cuddling into him as they looked up at the stars. "Now? Well, a lot has been happening. Have you heard about us all having to leave this base?"

"Wait. What?" She did a double-take, leaning to the side to meet his gaze. He realized she'd probably been so caught up in her own emotions in the aftermath of the mission that nobody had bothered to tell her about the upheaval coming for them all.

He filled her in on everything he knew and waited to see what she thought.

She wasn't military, so she could go wherever she wanted.

Pretty much. Zeke figured her grandfather would be able to find her a job wherever he ended up, if that's what she wanted.

Or, Zeke laid out the alternative that his unit had been given.

It was very likely that they were going to at least start out in Wyoming and get the lay of the land.

Whether or not they went independent—quit the military and become independent

contractors—was still an open question, but Zeke figured it would probably happen.

The foreseers in his unit, Rose and Jeeves, hadn't come right out and said it yet, but they had made some pretty strong hints about the future of the unit lying somewhere outside the confines of Uncle Sam's military.

Zeke figured they'd all have a long talk about it tonight and make their final decision before they had to leave tomorrow.

Which meant he had to find out what Celine wanted to do.

He didn't want to go anywhere without her.

Or, at least, without a plan for how they could be together as soon as time and circumstances allowed.

If things had been different, he would have been content to just let things happen naturally and not put her on the spot.

But neither of them had that luxury. The base's location was now known to the enemy, and they all had to go.

He sat up, and she followed suit as a patrol came into view a few yards away on the sand.

They waved to the two shifter soldiers who went on their way, and Zeke was glad they'd cleaned up and re-dressed.

He sat on the blanket, facing her, talking quietly about the options.

When he finished, he waited to hear what she thought.

“I’ve heard about the Wraiths,” Celine said slowly as she seemed to think over everything he had just told her.

“They are said to have great integrity, and superior skills. Mostly, I’ve heard about them from my grandfather.

I think he trained a lot of those guys. I’ve also heard that they have gained a great deal of protective magic over their territory in recent years.

There have been rumors about the rebirth of some serious earth elementals, dryads and the like, and even fey,” she told him, her expression speculative.

“Is that good?” he asked, still not completely familiar with the other magical races.

“It’s extremely powerful,” she said, meeting his gaze.

“And if they’re in the Wraiths’ territory, then they are aligned with the Light, which means they are unequivocally the good guys.

I’m intrigued enough to want to know more, and if you have an invitation to check out their territory and hospitality—and that invitation extends to me—then I’d want to go there and see what it’s all about. ”

“Even if it’s landlocked?” he asked, wanting to make sure she would be comfortable in the location. It was getting colder by the minute, so he stood and helped her to her feet. She grabbed the blanket and folded it as they talked.

“There must be water around there somewhere. Mountains often have lakes, I think.” She grinned, teasing him a little bit, he thought.

“It’s not the ocean, though,” he reminded her, feeling skeptical. “I want to be sure

you'll be happy there."

She stepped closer, the folded blanket between them as she put one hand over his heart, gazing up into his eyes. "As long as I'm with you, that's where I'm happiest. The rest, we can figure out as we go along."

She reached up and kissed him, sealing her words with the magic of their bond. He felt something click home inside him and wondered if that was their magic meshing, never to be parted. It certainly felt that way, and he couldn't be happier about it.

"So, you'll come with me if we end up in Wyoming? I'd say there's a ninety-five percent chance that we'll go there for at least a short visit while the brass figures out what to do with us," he told her.

"I can think of no place I'd rather be," she replied immediately, reaching up on her tiptoes to place a quick kiss on his jaw.

She drew back, smiling in a way that made his breath catch. She'd gone from somber and sad all the time to this joyful being that loved him and made him feel happy with each breath she took. How did he get so damned lucky?

She laughed again, the sound echoing over the lapping of the nearby waves as they stood together—two souls who had found light in the darkness. She was it for him, and he vowed he would do everything in his power to make her happy like this for the rest of their lives.

*

A short while later, Celine walked into the unit's building on Zeke's arm, neither of them even trying to hide her presence. He was her mate, and in the eyes of her people, they were a couple now that could never be separated. The human men of

Zeke's unit would figure it out sooner or later.

He walked her up to his room, greeting some of his friends along the way, but nobody objected to her presence.

They were all polite and greeted her gently.

Celine felt her excitement grow. The other guys seemed to be accepting her presence without question, which was awesome.

She hadn't really expected it, but it was a tremendous gift to her wild side to be accepted as Zeke's girlfriend by his comrades.

They'd learn soon enough that she was his mate and their relationship was permanent.

He led her into his room and closed the door behind her.

Celine stood just inside, the door clicking softly shut behind her.

Outside, the halls were quiet. Everyone was processing the aftermath of the tumultuous day in their own way.

Some patched wounds, others packed gear.

But her only thought—her only need—was her mate. Zeke.

He went to the window, his shoulders tensing.

He stared out at the darkened shoreline below, his muscles coiled tight.

He'd stopped to chat briefly with his commander when they'd entered the building, and she'd been sidetracked by one of the wives who'd stopped to see how she was holding up.

Zeke had been a bit tense after that, but he hadn't said anything until they were alone. Until now.

"The plans are confirmed," he said quietly. "We leave tomorrow. We're going to Wyoming, at least for a while. The Wraiths are ready to receive us."

She moved toward him, unhurried but sure. "Do you have a choice? I mean, you don't sound too thrilled about it. Are you going?"

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His answer was immediate as he turned to face her. “Only if you are. I told Hal I wouldn’t leave you, no matter what. He wasn’t happy, but he gave me time to sort things out with you. If you want to stay with your grandfather, Hal said he’d try to arrange things so I could go wherever he’s going.”

The raw need and honesty in his eyes stole her breath. He was always so strong, so steady, but right now, he looked uncertain. Of what, she wasn’t sure. Maybe their love? Her commitment to them as a couple?

He was human. He probably needed reassurance. He didn’t have the wild instincts that solidified the mating bond, but he’d become confident in it—in her—in time.

Celine reached for him, threading her fingers through his. “Then, I guess we’re going to Wyoming. I need to be wherever you are. Gramps doesn’t need me, and now that I’ve found my mate, I don’t need anybody but you, Zeke. Gramps knows that. All shifters do. Mates are everything. Mates are forever.”

His relief was visible. He released his held breath, and weight seemed to drop off his shoulders. He tugged her closer, pulling her into his arms.

“Then I guess we’re going to Wyoming. I asked, and there’s a lake on the mountain, not too far from the little settlement they’ve constructed. It’s freshwater, though. Is that a problem?”

“That is so sweet of you to find out,” she cooed, putting one hand on his chest, over his strong heart. “Freshwater isn’t a problem for me. It’ll be a nice change, and I’ll be the oddity among the shifters on the mountain. It’ll be fun.”

She smiled, already anticipating the games she might play with the other shifters.

Her seal was nothing if not playful. It already anticipated finding new friends among the larger shifter group.

They'd have to move fast to pack up and leave tomorrow, but there were still hours left before their world changed again.

And right now, she wanted something only he could give her.

She rose onto her toes, her mouth brushing his in a kiss that started soft and deepened with every heartbeat. Zeke responded immediately, his arms locking around her as if anchoring himself to her warmth, her strength.

Their clothes came off in quick, fumbling movements, driven by adrenaline and something more fragile beneath it— need . The need to feel alive. The need to feel connected. The need to remember who they were when the world wasn't watching.

They fell onto his bed in a tangle of limbs and desire, mouths seeking, hands claiming.

Zeke moved over her with reverence and heat, kissing a path down her throat to the hollow between her breasts, then back up to her lips, murmuring her name like a vow.

He undressed her, and then, she turned the tables, rolling so that she was over him, her hands discarding the fabric that covered him as quickly and efficiently as she could manage.

When they were both bare, she lowered herself against him, rubbing her wet slit against his hard cock.

Her breathing hitched as he groaned low in his throat, and she felt the rumble against her palms as they rubbed over his chest. She couldn't wait.

She lifted up, positioning him at her entrance, then sank down.

It was pure bliss. And, after the initial moment of entry and stillness that washed over her as she enjoyed the feel of him, they began to move. Their pace wasn't slow. It was urgent. Desperate. A reminder that they were still here, still fighting, still together.

She met him thrust for thrust, holding his gaze through every shudder and gasp, every whispered word. She didn't look away when her pleasure built to the breaking point, and he didn't either when he followed her over the edge.

They lay tangled together afterward, skin damp, hearts pounding, their breaths syncing slowly into something calmer. Zeke rolled to his side and brushed a damp lock of hair from her cheek.

"I meant what I said before," he whispered. "About trying to follow your grandfather. I don't really care where we go, as long as we're together."

She cupped his face, running her thumb over the rough line of his jaw.

"I don't care either. But if you're going to Wyoming, I'm going too."

"I think it's more important that you stick with your unit right now."

"They're your family, and you've all been through some pretty major changes."

"I've seen how you all are together. They need you, and you need them while you figure out all the new things in your lives and careers."

You need to stick with them, and I need to stick with you. ”

His smile was soft and tired, but real. “That’s all I needed to hear. You’re the best, Celine. Thanks for understanding.”

“No sweat, big guy,” she replied, tiredness coming over her.

It had been a really big day. Celine snuggled into his chest, her leg draped over his. She let the steady rhythm of his heartbeat lull her toward sleep, even as the weight of the day still loomed.

Tomorrow would probably be chaos as they all had to pack up and move. But tonight? What remained of tonight was theirs. And she wouldn’t trade that for anything.

*

The faint glow of early morning slipped through the slats in the blinds, casting soft golden lines across the bed.

Celine blinked awake slowly, her body still wrapped in the heat of Zeke’s.

One of his arms lay heavy around her waist, his chest pressed firmly against her back.

He was still asleep, his breath steady and warm against the nape of her neck.

For a long moment, she didn’t move. She wanted to memorize the quiet comfort of being skin-to-skin in a world that felt anything but safe.

The room was still, but just outside, she could hear movement. Boots on gravel. Distant engines rumbling. The unit was already beginning the evacuation process.

She swallowed against the sudden lump in her throat. They were really leaving.

Everything that had been familiar for the past few months—Plum Island’s hidden magic, the camaraderie of the other shifters, being with her grandfather, the sharp salt air—was about to become memory. It had never been permanent, not really. But she’d started to let herself believe it could be.

Zeke stirred behind her.

“You’re tense,” he murmured, still half-asleep.

“I’m thinking,” she whispered.

His arm tightened around her. “You’re not changing your mind, are you?”

She turned to face him, brushing her fingers through his sleep-mussed hair. “Never. I’m coming with you.”

Relief softened his features, and he leaned in to kiss her slow and tender, a quiet thank you she felt all the way to her toes.

“Good,” he said. “Because I’m sure Hal already warned the Wraiths that I’m bringing trouble with me.” He grinned at her, his teasing clear.

She smiled. “As long as I’m your kind of trouble.”

“You’re the only kind I want.”

They lay there a few minutes longer, not speaking, just listening to the day wake up around them. But time was slipping past, and duty would come knocking soon. Zeke kissed her one last time before sitting up and reaching for his pants.

“I’ll go help with gear checks. Hal wants everyone ready by this afternoon. Can you have your stuff ready by then?”

Celine stood and stretched, grabbing her clothes from the edge of the bed. “I’ll head back to my room and pack up. It won’t take long. I can be ready on time. I also need to check in with Gramps and say goodbye to my friends.”

Zeke crossed the room and pulled her into his arms once more, bare feet on the cold tile, his forehead resting against hers.

“I’m so glad you’re coming with me. We’ll build something new in Wyoming,” he said softly. “Different, maybe. But stronger.”

She nodded. “Together.”

He smiled, kissed her again, and they pulled apart reluctantly, the day finally calling them forward. As she stepped into the hallway, the rising sun lit the corridor in soft gold. The island felt quieter now—its secrets packed up, its magic tucked away. But her future?

It was walking just ahead of her, military boots laced tight, heart wide open.

And she was ready to follow it— him —into whatever came next.

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The candlelight flickered against ancient stone walls of Kettering Castle, illuminating shelves lined with arcane tomes and vials of dark liquid. The place fairly groaned under the weight of its ancient secrets and the current owner's dark use of the fortress that had stood for centuries.

Armando Salazar moved through the dim chamber with the grace of a predator, his fingers trailing over relics older than most civilizations.

He paused to sit before a table on which he'd set up a shallow silver bowl holding an enormous amount of mercury.

The mirror of liquid metal swirled with agitation as the spell Salazar had set on it came to life under his power.

He watched the events of the day before unfold on a distant continent with great interest. As he scried the action at the estate on Long Island and the failure of one of his most promising acolytes, he frowned, but otherwise kept his reaction from showing.

Almost idly, he traced one finger over the blood-red gem embedded in his ring.

Its surface pulsed faintly, as if alive.

It calmed him, allowing him to show a very different image to the world than the seething anger that pulsed in his soul.

This gem was his. The first he had ever received.

It was old. Older than himself, which was saying something.

And it was imbued with the power of all the dark wizards that had owned it before him, reaching back to the dawn of time.

It was because of this gem that he'd sought out the knowledge of how to craft more like it, though only time and centuries of blood and death could cause a carved gem to become as powerful as this one.

He petted it, secure in the knowledge that it was his and his alone, and nobody else understood its real power.

"She failed," Kettering spat, coming up behind Salazar, distracting him from the contemplation of his ring.

The young owner of the castle was a pawn, but a valuable one, which was why Salazar had partnered with him.

Even if he was sometimes a pain in the ass.

"They killed her." Kettering's voice grated, full of petulant anger.

Salazar didn't bother to look up from the scrying bowl where the last echoes of the female mage's demise still rippled across the water's surface.

"As expected," Salazar replied, his voice smooth as silk, laced with centuries of patience. "That was her purpose."

Kettering bristled. "I thought her purpose was to eliminate the girl and tie up loose ends. We've lost a valuable asset."

“No,” Salazar corrected smoothly. “We’ve gained insight into our enemy.”

“Insight,” Kettering’s voice sounded in a petulant sneer. Salazar finally raised his gaze, dark eyes gleaming with something far older—and far more dangerous—than Kettering could comprehend.

“Every pawn has its role, Abdul. Now, we know their strengths...and their weaknesses.”

He waved a hand over the scrying bowl. An image shimmered to life of Zeke and Celine walking along the shoreline, oblivious to the eyes watching them through magical means. Salazar’s lips curved into a predatory smile.

“The soldier and the selkie,” Salazar mused. “Such fragile creatures...yet fate favored them today.”

“We won’t be able to get to her now that she’s got one of those djinn-touched men guarding her,” Kettering said, watching the couple whose image was hazy on a distant beach.

“We don’t need to get her any longer. She’s fulfilled her purpose.

She led us to her grandfather, and through him to the secret island base where the shifter soldiers have gathered.

As a bonus, we now know more about the djinn-blessed men and where they’ve been hiding as well.

Two birds with one stone, and soon, I think, they’ll all be scattering.

They may have won the battle with our single mage and a few mercenary scum, but

we've managed to disrupt their entire operation.

They'll have to move and regroup somewhere else.

That will all take time. Time which we can use to our advantage, if we're smart. ”

Losing the promising young mage had hurt, but Salazar wouldn't let Kettering know that.

Salazar wanted his erstwhile ally to think that he found his minions interchangeable and expendable.

It kept them on their toes and might actually make Abdul a little easier to handle if he feared being sacrificed for the greater plan.

Salazar could hope. So far, Abdul had been more unstable mentally than Salazar had expected.

He was a loose cannon and needed constant reining in.

But he, too, could serve his purpose. If Salazar managed him well and used him properly.

“Let them celebrate their small victory. The true game is only just beginning,” Salazar went on, waving the scrying bowl to stillness and letting the image fade.

“What's your next move?” Kettering's impatience crackled through the air. Apparently, he hadn't been subdued. Well, Salazar would have to continue to work on that. He needed to have control over Kettering, not the other way around.

“We let them believe they've won,” Salazar said, his voice a silken threat. “And

when they begin to hope...we remind them that the past is never truly buried.” He lifted a newly carved ruby from the table, its depths swirling with malevolent power.

“Let the games begin.”

Kettering’s mood seemed to shift like the quicksilver in the bowl. He cackled, sounding completely unhinged. Salazar hid his inner wince. The boy really needed to get a grip on his outbursts. Still, he was a good foil for the real brains of the operation. Salazar, of course.

“Contact the second apprentice,” he ordered. “It’s time to unleash something...more entertaining.”

Kettering hesitated. “And the djinn-blessed Green Berets?”

Salazar chuckled, low and ominous. “They’ll wish they’d died in Babylon.”

The candles flickered violently, then extinguished, leaving only darkness...and the faint, malevolent glow of the ruby. The chamber darkened as the magic flared, and the future of light and shadow hung in the balance.

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Two days later in Wyoming

Zeke and the unit were settling in to guest cabins on the side of the Wraiths’ mountain in Wyoming better than he’d expected.

Surprisingly, some of the guys had worked with quite a few of the Wraiths when they were still employed by Uncle Sam.

Nobody had realized they were shifters then, of course, and it was strange to learn that the comrades they'd met in foreign lands on dangerous missions had been werewolves, cougar shifters, bear shifters, and the like, all along.

The majority of people on the mountain were werewolves because Major Jesse Moore and his brother, Jason, were Alphas of the Wraiths and the Wyoming Wolf Pack, respectively.

The Wraiths had claimed the top of the mountain while the rest of the larger Pack was arrayed around the lower elevations.

But the Wraiths had attracted all sorts of ex-military shifters to their ranks, and quite a few of them were settling into family life with wives and children.

That surprised him. They were still fighters who went on missions as an elite mercenary unit, but they had this safe place hidden away on a mountaintop in Wyoming to come home to.

Families, children running around, beautiful scenery, and they were building a real community here with homes that blended into the scenery, dotted around the top of the mountain.

If he hadn't seen it with his own eyes, he doubted anybody would know that such a large group was living here.

Not even with access to satellite imagery.

These shifters were really good at stealth, and they seemed to take it into account in every facet of their lives, including how they built their homes.

It was freaking brilliant, Zeke thought. He had to admire the way they had blended

their homes into the natural wonder of the mountain and forest all around them. It was downright magical.

It took a day to settle into their new quarters and get the lay of the land, including meetings with the command chain of the Wraiths.

The unit had been briefed by Major Moore and his lieutenants, and they'd met the other soldiers, their wives and some of the children at a big dinner celebration hosted in what they called the Pack house, later that first night.

The atmosphere had been welcoming and celebratory.

There'd also been a little bit of hesitation as people got to know each other.

A lot of that dropped by the wayside the next day when Hal arranged for a small demonstration of each of the Green Beret's new magical abilities.

A petite woman with elfin beauty and intense features had been invited to watch the demonstration as well, making Zeke want to scratch his head in confusion.

She sat on the edge of the small crowd and just watched while the guys were put through their paces.

Zeke couldn't figure what she was all about.

She didn't look sturdy enough to be one of the shifters, but she seemed to have magic about her, though Zeke couldn't really explain why he thought so.

At one point, she caught him staring at her, and she grinned back and winked.

He hadn't expected that. He turned away, still confused by her presence, but then, it

was his turn, and he had to put on a show for the new guys, so they could understand a little better what he could do.

Lynn, who had moved to Wyoming with them, presented Zeke with a small cotton drawstring pouch. He shot her a look, questioning with his eyes. He learned enough from her by now to know that she often stored magical objects in bags like this, made of natural fibers.

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“It’s a precaution,” she told him. “This is something the lady over there brought to be read. I checked with Rose and Jeeves, and they both agreed this was the right step to take. I’m not sure what it is, or what it will show you, but they both said you have to read it here and now.”

Lynn stepped back, leaving the object with Zeke. He immediately sought the gaze of his friend Jeeves, who had been given the gift of foresight by the ancient djinn in the Tower of Babel. He looked very serious and nodded encouragement.

Zeke resigned himself to whatever was coming. Reading magical objects wasn’t something he had done often, and it always came with a little surprise. Not usually a pleasant one. He opened the pouch and allowed the contents to fall gently onto the small table in front of him.

It was a rock. He examined it visually before reaching out to touch it. At first, he thought it was just a regular black rock with crags and inclusions. Nothing special. But then, the light hit it in just the right way, and he saw that it wasn’t black at all. It was red. Blood red. Freshly spilled.

He almost wanted to shy away, but this rock was in its natural state.

It might be inherently magical in some way, but it hadn’t been shaped by man.

He wasn’t sure, but he didn’t think a rock—even a magical one—could be inherently good or evil.

It was the will of the mage that used it that turned it one way or the other.

At least, that's what made sense to him.

Heaven help them if he was wrong because he had to touch this thing, and it felt powerful even without direct connection.

Bracing himself, he took a deep breath and then reached out with one finger, touching the rock with just the tip of his finger, experimentally.

He gasped as images flooded his mind. Images of a rock just like this one.

A rock that had been part of this one until broken up by some mining tool.

The other piece of this rock had found its way to a place he recognized.

Kettering Castle. Zeke swore under his breath and removed his hand from the rock. He looked up to report what he'd seen.

"This is a piece of a ruby that was, or is being, carved into some kind of magical talisman by a mage in Kettering Castle. The stone by itself is powerful, but the guy who's crafting it is turning its natural magic into something dark and twisted.

I think it's going to be the center stone of a ring.

A man's ring. It was very large and bulky, and there were some of those arcane designs carved into it.

Both on the silver of the ring itself and on the ruby. "

"Silver or white gold?" Major Moore asked, frowning. "Or maybe platinum?"

"Pure silver," Zeke replied. He wasn't precisely sure how he knew that, but he was

positive.

Moore and several of the other shifters muttered curses.

Zeke knew now that silver was poison to shifters, and the fact that the ring was made of it probably meant something dire to them.

Zeke would have to ask about it later. Right now, he had to look a little deeper.

He reached out and made contact with the stone again, this time touching it with three fingers.

The results were immediate, and strong. He kept his eyes closed, speaking of what he saw.

“Salazar,” he said.

“The stone mage,” a female voice intoned in almost musical notes.

Zeke looked up to find the small woman had moved from the edge of the crowd to stand opposite him on the other side of the small table. He’d removed his hand from the rock and looked at her questioningly.

“Ma’am?” He cocked his head, using his most respectful tone of voice.

Now that she was closer, he felt power radiating off her, though he couldn’t explain it.

Perhaps it was some new manifestation of his power that he could feel the intensity of magical beings.

He'd felt something from the mage and some of the shifters, but this woman was off the charts of his limited experience.

"Uh..." Major Moore stepped forward to make introductions. "This is Leonora, our resident dryad." His eyes sparked with both humor and affection as he met the older woman's eyes. She smiled back at him in a grandmotherly way.

Dryad? Zeke had studied mythology. Dryads were supposed to be magical wood nymphs with power over the living forest and the earth. He'd heard them described as earth elementals. Which made this rock an even more interesting specimen.

"Pleased to make your acquaintance, ma'am," Zeke said politely. She nodded at him and motioned toward the rock that sat on the table between them.

"Go on. What else do you see, young man?" she urged gently.

Zeke reached out once more and took the stone into his hand. Once again, the images flashed through his mind. He spoke of what he saw.

"Salazar has a workshop in Kettering Castle. I've seen it before and recognize the skyline out the window. I see him there, working on the other half of this stone, forging it into the ring. Kettering is there too, watching and learning," Zeke said.

"Learning stone lore?" Leonora asked, prompting him in the direction she wanted.

Zeke shook his head. "He doesn't have the aptitude for it, but he's useful in other ways.

That's what Salazar said to him while he worked.

The other part of this stone has been in his workshop for weeks.

There are a lot of conversations and things it saw that I can access.

This could take a while. And...it's still there.

It's like a direct line to anything that happens in that workshop.

"Zeke opened his eyes and let go of the stone.

The dryad beamed at him. "Then you should keep it and sort through everything it sees," she told him. "You might learn something important." With a wink, she retreated back to her earlier position at the periphery of the crowd.

The rest of the guys did their own demonstrations.

Dan walked through the wall of the building and back again.

Hal bent a steel rod with his bare hands, demonstrating his Herculean strength.

Rick healed a bad cut one of the guys had gotten earlier in the day.

Jeeves foretold the precise moment someone would sneeze in the crowd, drawing laughter, but he then went on to give a more somber prediction about the future.

"Rose and I have agreed to be cautious about what we say. I think you shifters know more about foresight and the responsibilities of my new power than we do, so I suspect you'll understand that I'm treading a fine line between how much I can say and how much I have to withhold in order to let the future unfold in the best possible way.

What I can say, now that we're here, is that I believe our unit is going to be heavily involved in the struggle against Elspeth.

We're going to fight side-by-side with you all.

And we're going to make it clear to everyone that we've sworn our allegiance to the Light, and we'll never be swayed from that path.

I know the brass is talking about what to do with us, and I already know how that's going to turn out.

I've conferred with Rose, and we don't think it will change the outcome if I say that in all likelihood, our unit is going to end up becoming the human arm of the Wraiths.
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Thanks for reading Echoes of the Past .

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Wyoming – A Week After the Unit's Arrival

The air was thin up here. Crisp and wild, filled with pine and wind, and the lingering trace of snow that clung stubbornly to shaded hollows. Celine stood at the door of a cabin situated at the edge of a rocky outcrop overlooking a small valley. She had her arms wrapped around herself more out of habit than from the cold. As a selkie, her internal temperature stayed warm, even when the wind cut sideways across the craggy peak. A gift of her shifter heritage