



The First Trial (The Unity Trials #1)

Author: *Natasha Campbell-Jones*

Category: Fantasy

Description: As a witch I was already a fantastical creature, so why was it so surprising to discover we weren't the only ones?

My life had always been full of secrets. I was adopted as a baby, but after arriving at Aurora Academy to start my journey into Witch-hood at the ripe age of twelve, I discovered I had a twin brother. Adopted into a different family, he also had more questions than answers, so we began our search for the truth. Except no one could know that we were twins, and our birth parents could never find out that we found each other.

Keeping that secret was hard enough, but everything changed the moment our campus was transported to a different realm. A realm that held even more secrets than we could fathom. Secrets that may have held answers to why my twin and I were separated at birth.

Five academies from five unique realms had suddenly found themselves in a strange, undocumented dimension, each of us shocked to discover the creatures from our myths were real. Only reality was significantly different from the stories. Thrust into a strange new world, all of us were forced to participate in the Unity Trials. The purpose of these trials was shrouded in mystery, and my suspicions grew with each day we were trapped here. Only one thing was clear: all five academies must learn to work together or face deadly consequences. I just hoped we could unite as one sooner rather than later, because it was the only way we were getting out of this alive.

Let the First Trial begin.

This is book 1 in fantasy romance series where the FMC does not have to choose between her love interests. There will be some dark themes and open door spicy scenes. All main characters are in their 20s or older.

DISCLAIMER I am a British author and write in British English. There will be some discrepancies between the English and American spellings.

Total Pages (Source): 26

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 4:06 am

Evander

Metal clashed, the sound reverberating throughout the training stadium followed by the brief illumination of sweat and strain as sparks flew. I watched on, studying the battling students' forms and taking note of their moves. This was an advanced class so I was focusing more on their strategies than technical skill. They may have surpassed the physical prowess needed to progress to this class, but they were always more to learn and improve upon.

While the pairs were focused on their sparring they didn't see the procession of white-robed officials enter the stadium. I ignored them in favour of performing my duties as the instructor. Whatever the unwelcome visitors needed, they could wait.

Training continued until the last victory was called, which was well after the sun dipped below the stadium walls. The sconces were lit by the time I called it and allowed everyone to leave for the evening, but I remained by the weapons racks, oiling up the blade of one of the practice daggers as I waited for the last of them to trickle out.

When the gate shut us away from the prying eyes of our future warriors, that was when the council finally approached.

'Evander,' the tall, slim man in the front greeted me. His face was a familiar one, though it had been a long time since I had seen it.

'Uncle,' I greeted back with a respectful nod. 'What can I do for you?'

‘We’ve caught one of the Infected,’ he said, not bothering with pleasantries and heading straight for the shock factor.

My hands froze in their task before I wiped the dagger dry and put it back in its sheath. ‘What?’

‘It’s still alive.’

I inhaled sharply at that news. Only one live Infected had ever been captured, and that was well before my time. ‘How?’

‘That is irrelevant,’ he stated blandly, waving off my question. I gritted my teeth to prevent the nasty words that tried to escape, but I calmed myself with the knowledge that my curiosity would be sated eventually, if not immediately. If we’d learned how to capture them, that information would be passed around to instructors such as myself to teach the next generation of warriors.

But my uncle’s refusal to impart that information himself was telling enough. Something else had happened that had brought him and his merry band of followers to me.

I didn’t prompt him to continue, instead biting my tongue and letting the silence speak for me. We’d danced this dance many times before, and I wasn’t about to give in. Not to him.

With a small, almost imperceptible twitch of his eye he finally relented, the only indication he allowed of his annoyance with me. ‘It spoke.’

My eyebrows darted to the top of my head, the reaction impossible to contain. Infected never spoke. Their minds were too far gone to use basic civility. The fact that this one had communicated in any way beyond their typical, haunting screeches

proved that it was either newly turned or the infection was evolving.

I prayed to the Great Goddess that it wasn't the latter.

'What did it say?' I asked with great trepidation.

'It said, 'It is coming.' '

I frowned at that, my forehead aching slightly at its unusual activity, used to the smooth lines of stoicism over the emotional reactions I couldn't seem to contain.

'What is coming?'

My uncle's lips, the same shape as my own, the same shape I'd received from my father – his brother – and their father before them, pursed in distaste. 'That is why we have come to you, Nephew. We do not know.'

Comprehension dawned and I sighed in resignation. 'You want my knowledge on The Darkness,' I surmised.

The male standing behind my uncle stepped forward, answering in his place and I was grateful to be addressing a different member of the council for this conversation. Researching The Darkness was a punishable offense, and the only reason I had remained out of the pits of the palace's dungeons was due to my connection to the council. Where once I had been set to join when the time came, I was instead dismissed from our warrior ranks and imprisoned in our capital's academy instead. Here, I was to remain until the end of my sentence, my punishment to teach generation after generation of wannabe warriors and turn them into something worthwhile.

I didn't bother to tell them that while I missed executing my borne purpose of decimating the Infected population, I was grateful to be teaching these fresh-faced

innocents how to survive. Under my tutelage, our warriors were less prone to death on the battlefield, and it seemed were even clever enough to capture one of those monsters still breathing . An impossible task even I had never managed to achieve.

‘It seems your... obsession has its use after all, Nephew,’ my uncle sneered, and it took every ounce of my willpower not to sneer right back. My nose twitched with the effort as he continued to look at me with clear derision, crinkling his nose like he was scenting something disgusting.

Right back at you, you pathetic, power hungry bastard.

My eyes connected with his, an almost exact replica of my own except for the thin lines digging into the corners of his. They were a little deeper than I remembered, an indication of the stress he must have been under. It didn’t come as a shock that these past few years had taken their toll. The Infected population had increased significantly, dangerously , while our numbers were depleting at a rapid rate.

This war was one that had been fought for centuries, but there was no denying that we were losing. More of us were contracting whatever disease it was that caused us to turn into black-veined, cannibalistic monsters, and we were no closer to finding a cure. I didn’t even think there was one until I’d started researching the Old Texts. The very reason for my expulsion from the front lines.

Reading the Old Texts was expressly forbidden for the sole reason that reading from them had caused our plight in the first place. It contained a dark magic that was inadvertently released by the monarchy all those centuries ago. It was the reason the courts were abolished, the monarchies removed from power and replaced by the council, and why I was facing punishment for cracking open their spines, but I hadn’t seen any other choice. It was those tomes that had unleashed this plague, and it was those tomes that would fix it. I just knew it.

‘What information are you seeking, uncle?’ I asked warily. He was the one that had arrested me for my crime in the first place, so to say I was shocked that he was seeking the information I had gleaned while I still had access to the Old Texts was an understatement. But perhaps the tides were changing and their minds were opening to receive the information we needed to finally win this war.

‘Anything you can tell us, Nephew. Anything that can help us push back against us contracting the disease,’ he said gravely, but his strange wording struck a chord. Us . It was the first time he had ever even come close to acknowledging that the Infected had once been Fae just like the rest of us, that even he was at risk for contracting the disease that plagued our people.

‘Who?’ I asked him, avoiding his question.

He blinked at me, his face suddenly slack in false ignorance. ‘I don’t know what you mean.’

‘Don’t play dumb with me, Uncle. Who was it that you apparently caught? Who was it that succumbed to the infection?’ I demanded.

I could see the battle waring inside his head. He didn’t want to tell me, but he also knew I was stubborn enough to refuse him if he didn’t give me at least some of the answers I sought. He already knew that I would find out what I wanted to know on my own terms if didn’t provide the answers I demanded then and there, and that could have been disastrous for his sad little social climbing ways. We were both well aware that there was an abundance of skeletons in his closet, and I was more than willing to shine a light on them if he pushed me to it.

It was a delicate line we toed, he and I.

‘Councilwoman Morgana,’ he finally gritted out through clenched teeth, the

admission obviously costing him a great deal of pride. No wonder he and the others were coming to me. One of their own had been infected. They'd just had their own mortality, their own vulnerability shoved in their faces and they didn't like it.

Welcome to reality, you self-righteous assholes.

'I'm sorry to hear that,' I said, though I was anything but. Councilwoman Morgana was a bitch and homewrecker. We Fae may have been rather relaxed in our stance towards sexuality and polyamory, but when fated bonds were involved there was no tolerance for infidelity. Morgana had been in a rather tumultuous relationship with my uncle before she'd tricked my father into sleeping with her. The event that had led his twin flame, my mother, to kill herself rather than live with that betrayal. Yet, my dearest uncle had remained with the whore and flaunted their relationship in front of both Father and I as often as he could.

I held in the smile that wanted to break free from the good news. Anyone else and I might have felt a smidgen of sorrow for – or if not that, then regret – but I was going to celebrate her demise as soon as these council assholes went back to the gilded hole they'd crawled out of.

'Well?' he prompted when I didn't immediately offer up the information he was seeking.

I sighed, not wanting to provide these people with information that could potentially doom us all but not seeing any way out of it. If they were finally willing to listen, then we could finally find the cure for our troubles.

'They're called the Unity Trials,' I stated.

All three councillors frowned, confused. 'What are the Unity Trials?'

I shrugged. 'I don't really know. All I can recall is that in order to defeat the Darkness, we need to unite all the magics and work in tandem to beat it back.'

'And what do these trials entail?' the third councilman asked, finally partaking instead of simply observing.

'They didn't say. The Old Texts suggest a ritual to initiate the Trials. Beyond that, there was no more information,' I told them.

'And why did you not come forth with this information before, Master Evander?' Councilman Number Three asked, his disapproval abundant.

I huffed, my annoyance at my uncle growing into something almost uncontrollable, but I held back my desire to strike against him. Mostly. 'I did,' I admitted. 'Isn't that right, Uncle? '

Both councilmen turned to level him with accusing glares, but he merely responded with a scoff. 'And how was I supposed to know you were telling the truth, Nephew? You had broken the law, committed a grave crime, and your ramblings were making no sense. Anything you spewed that day was written off as the ramblings of a man obsessed with the dark arts, and rightly so.'

I lifted a brow to express my disbelief, but he merely ignored me. His peers seemed mollified for the time being, my attempt to sow a seed of doubt in their great leader unsuccessful, though I hadn't expected any other result. The council was filled with Fae that refused to think for themselves. Their opinions were my Uncle's opinions, or they didn't have any at all.

'And how do we initiate these Unity Trials?' he asked, nudging us back on topic.

With a world-weary sigh, I told them what I could remember of the steps needed to

perform the ritual. It was a simple set-up, even if it was unusual – and many considered it unnatural – to perform spells. That was something the Humans of myths had done, stealing their magic from the world around them in what they'd considered witchcraft . I didn't know if there was any truth to those myths, but I hoped they were nothing more than stories. Yet, I couldn't completely discount it. I was a strong believer that every story held a grain of truth, though how much truth the stories of Witches and Warlocks held I had no idea. They were depicted as barely more than magical thieves borne of no real innate power. They took and they took until nothing natural remained, moulding the world into their image and sucking up all the raw power they could find until the world around them died.

Unfortunately, we Fae weren't any better. While stories of the round-eared Witches and Warlocks were passed down as cautionary tales, we had failed to heed those lessons which was how we had found ourselves in a centuries-long war with the product of our own failures. I just hoped that whatever these Unity Trials contained, it didn't doom us further than we already were.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 4:06 am

Juniper

Fridays were my favourite. Not because I didn't have to go to class or teach rowdy middle schoolers for an entire weekend, but because these were the nights I got to sneak out to Ozzie's for our weekly sleepover.

That was why I was currently peeking out from behind a mess of tiny leaves and sharp twigs, trying unsuccessfully to avoid getting scratched as I hid some foliage while all the other students at Aurora Academy's university campus headed in droves towards the student village. The grad students were notorious for nightlife on Fridays, which was one of the reasons Oz and I picked that day to do this. We couldn't let anyone discover us.

Once I was sure the coast was finally clear, I darted from the bush and dashed into the dorm building that housed his room. I didn't wait around, bolting up the grand staircase that separated in the middle. Girls on the left, boys on the right. I glanced around me and cast my magic out to perform a quick scan that we truly were alone before knocking on the familiar green door.

Knock.

Knock, knock... knock.

The door swung open and a large hand grabbed a hold of the front of my shirt, dragging me inside before slamming the door shut behind me.

'You weren't followed?' Oz asked.

‘Nope,’ I grinned, smoothing out the wrinkled he’d made with his fist and wincing when I brushed against a shallow cut. It didn’t escape his notice, and he immediately waved a hand in my direction. The warmth of his magic ran over me as it sought any injuries, and soon enough the cuts were completely healed over like they’d never even been there.

I was about to send him a grateful smile but he engulfed me in an all-consuming bearhug before I got the chance. My arms latched around his neck as we squeezed each other as hard as we could, the peaceful sense of coming home warming me from the inside out.

He released a sigh of relief. ‘Fuck, I missed you, Junie.’

‘I missed you too, Ozzie. This is torture,’ I admitted. It was the same thing we said to one other every Friday, but it was no less true each time.

He pulled away to look me in the eye, the brilliant blue eyes that were an exact match to mine glinting with excitement that filled me with tentative hope.

‘You found something?’ I asked, barely daring to put the question out into the universe for fear of being crushed by the answer. Again.

But I didn’t need to worry this time. This time, his answer had me beaming from ear to ear.

‘I found something,’ he confirmed with a beaming grin, then led me over to his bed where a stash of old tomes were spread out across his sheets. A few were open to reveal worn pages with writing in a language long since forgotten by our kind. Said to be spoken by the Fae, a race of mythological creatures rumoured to have walked the earth long before Humans, Old Fae was a dead language that was still largely indecipherable for most. The others were closed, their worn, faded brown and grey

leather covers simple and plain with no decoration beyond the engraved, Old Fae symbols that held the titles of each book. They were dusty when we'd first discovered them deep in the recesses of Aurora Academy's library. We didn't have a restricted section, necessarily, but these were stashed away in a forgotten room hidden away inside the library's walls. We'd cleaned them up enough to crack them open without coughing a long time ago, taking great care to ensure they remained in better condition than we'd found them.

We had been decoding the symbols to read through them for years, but without much luck. While we had be partially successful, the writings didn't make much sense. It was like trying to put together a puzzle only to discover we were missing most of the pieces.

'What is it? What did you find?' I bounced on my toes, eager for answers. If he truly had found something that could help us then we could finally be free. We wouldn't need to hide anymore. I held myself back from pouncing on the books, though I wanted nothing more than to tear through them to discover Oz's breakthrough for myself. He wasn't moving fast enough for my whirring, overexcited brain.

He flipped each tome open to a specific page and arranged them on his bed, though the reason why was lost to me. When he saw me staring at him in confusion he gestured to the pages with a smug smile tugging up the corner of his mouth, highlighting the dimple there that we both shared. He was awfully pleased with himself, but I couldn't see why. Clearly I was missing something.

I frowned down at the displayed pages. 'I don't understand.'

'Look,' he said, pointing at the pages, so I tried again. I scanned the swirling symbols inked onto the pages and attempted to read the ones I recognised, but if there was anything to say about Old Fae it was powerful and difficult to translate even with the ability to read a few symbols here and there.

Ancient, forgotten words dotted the pages in a seemingly random fashion that I failed to make sense of. I caught certain scribbles I recognised from our personal studies: Black. Sickness. Womb. Trials. But still, despite those few words jumping out at me, I couldn't see what Oz was trying to show me. I looked up at him and shrugged, eyes wide as I waited for him to actually show me what he'd found.

His gaze darted from me back down to the tomes, then poked his tongue out the corner of his mouth as he studied them, his lips pursing in concentration. After a moment of deliberation he snorted and adjusted the way they were spread. 'Oops. I did it backwards.'

He sent me a crooked grin when I giggled, pulling a silly face at his mistake. I stuck out my tongue and wrinkled my nose in response, the action warm and familiar. Silly faces was sort of our thing, not that anyone but us really knew that. It was essentially our way of saying I love you without voicing the words out loud, our sneaky little way around the magical gag order preventing us from speaking to one another in public. Sometimes, though, it just felt good to do it when it was just the two of us, a reminder that we could still interact despite the contingency of spells that attempted to keep us apart.

When I studied the pages once more I finally noticed what he'd found. With the tomes arranged in just the right positioning the magic slowly revealed itself. It started as a shimmer, like the reflection of gentle waves cast against a rocky cave wall, then the words rearranged on the pages until they connected to form a picture. It was a woman and a man, their hands connected. It was like the puzzle pieces were finally slotting together, the randomness from before merging into an image with astonishing detail. Their faces were clear, and that was what was the most shocking, because they looked just like me and Oz.

But there was more to the image that we couldn't see. The edges seemed frayed as if it were torn from the centre of a bigger image, the magic fading into fractured smoke.

Were there more tomes needed to piece together the full picture? Perhaps. Or maybe it was something else. Regardless of what it was, it was clear that something was missing, but what?

‘What is this?’ I asked, awed by the detail of the design and the effort that must have gone into creating such a masterpiece. Magic emanated from in waves so subtle I had to really focus to feel it, yet powerful enough to raise goosebumps on my skin and vibrate my own magic inside my veins. It was as if they recognised one another and were responding to the proximity, almost as if they were trying to reach out to touch the other.

‘It’s us,’ he said gravely, all levity leaking from him as we gazed upon what could only be a prophecy. Our prophecy. The awe I felt before morphed into a spine-chilling realisation that whatever curse was placed upon us had been long-since foretold. Our path forward was written in the stars, but if history had taught us anything it was that nothing good ever happened to those whose fate was recorded.

‘What does it mean?’ I asked, but unless he’d been able to gather some information I had yet to see then I doubted he’d be able to give me those answers just yet.

‘I think we need to decipher the texts before we can figure that out, Junie,’ he confirmed. ‘I have a feeling the answers we seek are right here. We just need to figure out how to read it.’

I inhaled deeply before tearing my gaze from the tomes to lighten the mood with a smile. This was work well done and he deserved a break before we cracked down on our research once more. ‘Well, we’re not going to get that done in one night. I say we continue deciphering the Fae language in our spare time and put it aside for today. I don’t want to spend our one night together poring over musty old books.’

He huffed but the smile hiding in his lips let me know he was thinking along the same

lines. We could have spent our time together working, but both of us would have rather spent it in enjoying the moment. These Friday nights were all we got, and it was only these past few years that we'd even managed to figure out that little workaround to the curse.

We'd been raised separately our entire lives, ignorant to the other's existence until we'd both started at Aurora Academy. The middle school campus was where we learned who we were to one another after we'd been partnered up for a project in class and discovered we couldn't speak, up until we'd met in private and the words flowed without a hitch. A rapid-fire mutual interrogation revealed we had the same birthday, we'd both been adopted, and an awkwardly thorough inspection of the other's unusually similar physical features allowed us to connect the final dots. Yet when we'd re-entered the general population of the campus for classes, the magical gag was back in place. Magic was holding our tongues, and it made absolutely no sense, so we'd put our heads together to dig deeper into the cause.

What we'd found had rocked both of our worlds to the core, turning everything upside down and destroying any sense of peace we had ever known. Confirmation came in the form of Ozzie's father, who had apparently been friends with our bio-dad though they were no longer on speaking terms. We were twins, separated at birth and adopted into families from different covens. Only one question remained: why?

Well, that one was a doozy, but we'd long since processed those emotions and moved on from the absolute betrayal we'd felt from our birth parents. As it turned out, Oz had been adopted by a close friend of both of our parents, not just our father, but I'd been tossed aside completely by everyone and adopted into a family with zero connections to either of them. It was why Oz and I had taken so long to find one another in the first place, which we'd later learned through his adoptive father was by design.

It had hurt at first. I'd wondered why him and not me? Why did they want him closer

to them only to send me as far away as they possibly could? I'd long since determined that I didn't particularly want the answers to those questions, but I'd also accepted that they were undoubtedly a necessary piece to this puzzle we were still piecing together twelve years later.

It was the reason why I chose to focus on the positives whenever I could. I may not have been capable of speaking with my twin in front of others, but we had developed a relationship many siblings would have been envious of, choosing each other time and time again throughout the years until we had become each other's person. I couldn't have imagined my life without my Ozzie. We may have only had our Friday night sleepovers to truly connect and spend time with one another, but that was still one day a week we got with each other uninterrupted while our friends went out and partied without us. They'd long since learned that we were homebodies on Fridays, using the excuse of our jobs teaching at the middle school. We'd decided to apply for teaching positions as another way to be closer to each other during the week, our connection like a living creature that needed the proximity to keep it docile.

It was becoming harder and harder to be apart the older we got, like a ticking time bomb counting down the minutes until our curse destroyed us. Yet another reason why we were so desperate to break it. We could feel its malevolence growing each day, slithering beneath our skin like a serpent ready to strike.

‘What do you suggest, sis?’

He flinched when I smirked, already knowing what I was about to say but I was jumping on the bed with excitement before he could protest. ‘Dance party! Dance party!’

He huffed but the fondness in his eyes let me know he wasn't truly upset with me or the suggestion. Instead, he merely smiled and waved a hand to turn on the music, a thin stream of his magic shooting from his palm to connect with the speakers. I

grinned when I recognised the opening guitar strums of The Proclaimers' I'm Gonna Be (500 Miles) , my head already nodding along. This was our song, and while he may have griped about a dance party, we both knew he loved being goofy with me. He didn't even complain this time, instead immediately putting on a truly terrible Scottish accent that clashed with mine as we sang and danced along.

Even if our secret came out I doubted he would ever admit to these moments, but that was okay. I liked that his goofiness was for me, and me alone, but I would forever tease him over his too-cool-for-fun attitude. With me, he may have let loose and been as much of a weirdo as me, but in public he had perfected the quiet, mysterious bad-boy persona that made my nose wrinkle in disgust. It wasn't that I didn't appreciate a bad boy, but I hated the way the girls here threw themselves at him simply because they thought they could change him. There wasn't anything about him that needed changing. He was my perfect little brother, because yes, I was a whole two minutes older and I milked it for all it was worth and then some.

Song after song played while we danced like no one was watching until we were breathless and laughing so hard we were bent over, clutching our stomachs. It was like we were making up for time lost as kids and we milked it for all it was worth.

Eventually, we crashed onto his bed and turned on a movie. He tucked me under his arm and I snuggled into his side, more content than I had been all week.

That was how we fell asleep.

???

Bright light filtered through the window, burning my retinas through my eyelids and forcing me to move away from the assault on my senses with a tired groan. A deeper voice mimicked the sound before a heavy, muscular arm draped over my waist, the bony elbow digging into my stomach.

And then a big, smelly foot kicked into my legs and shoved me right off the bed.

I fell to the floor with an oof , barely catching myself before my forehead could smack into the solid wood flooring.

‘Ass!’ I shouted, laying where I fell because I was too lazy to move.

Ozzie’s eyes blinked dazedly down at me as he peeked over the edge of the bed, and then he chuckled when he realised what had happened. ‘Sorry, sis. I was just tryin’ to starfish.’

I pouted, then an idea came to me and my pout turned into a wide grin. He pulled back warily, and rightfully so, but he didn’t put enough distance between us to escape.

‘Starfish this, bitch,’ I mumbled before I grabbed onto his fingers still clutching the edge of the mattress and added a little extra assistance with my air affinity to push him over the rest of the way over while I yanked.

Unfortunately, it wasn’t the most well-thought-out plan, because he landed right on top of me and knocked the breath from my lungs. His elbow jabbed so hard into my ribs it was any wonder they hadn’t shattered inside my chest. I wheezed.

‘Oh, shit. Junie, you okay?’

‘Bad... idea...’ I struggled to squeeze out past the pain.

Suddenly, just as he was pulling away from me, the light through the window flashed so bright that I slammed my eyelids shut. Oz covered my body with his protectively, then crashed on top of me when an excruciatingly high-pitched ringing sliced through the air and we both pressed our hands over our ears in a useless attempt to shut it out.

It swelled louder and louder until a scream burst from my throat that I felt more than heard.

And then there was silence. Not a twitter of a bird, the buzz of electricity, or even the shuffle of clothing reached my ears, and panic rose up inside me. I could feel my chest rising and falling rapidly, the air being sucked into my lungs drying up my raw throat, but I couldn't hear those breaths either. Had my eardrums burst?

A hand clamped down on my shoulder and shook, and I cautiously blinked open my eyes, afraid I would be blind as well as deaf. Luckily, all it took was a few blinks for my eyes to adjust, though splotches of colour danced in my vision and blurred my surroundings. I could still make out Oz's worried expression above me.

And the lines of blood trickling from his ears and his nostrils.

His thumb swiped under my own nose and came away soaked in red when he pulled it back.

His mouth moved to form words, but no sound reached me. I could tell by the shape of the words that he was saying my name, but I realised he was also deaf when he frowned and looked away, his lips forming those same shapes until his jaw opened wide, his chest rose as he breathed in deep, and then his neck strained as his face turned purple. A scream.

Still, nothing.

I patted his arm, drawing his attention and lifted my torso from the floor so I could wrap my arms around his in a hug we both desperately needed if the way he squeezed me back was any indication.

When we were both calm enough to release the other, he pulled away and sent out a

wave of his magic to study our injuries. It felt strange, like a soothing caress but still oddly invasive as it wove its way into my very being before focusing on my ears with a wave of heat. My eardrums knitted back together with an uncomfortable prickling sensation, and the silence that greeted me after was louder than ever before. There was no sign of movement outside of the dorm room, but at least now I could hear the way our breaths sawed in and out of our lungs, the rustle of fabric as we rose to stand, and even the wind brushing up against the window with a slight whistle.

Still no birds, though. Never a good sign...

‘Thanks,’ I told him.

‘Of course,’ he said, but he was already on the move towards his window. He ripped open the curtains the rest of the way and looked outside while I studied his reaction. His eyes widened while his browed lowered, his jaw dropping as he gawked at whatever he saw. Under any other circumstances I might have found the expression amusing. Now, I just found it concerning. What was he seeing that caused such a reaction?

When his jaw dropped even lower and the breath was expelled from his lungs like he’d been punched in the gut, I couldn’t handle the suspense any longer and joined him to look out the pane of glass that separated us from the outside world.

A world that at first glance looked exactly the same as any other time we’d looked out this window. That was until we raised our gazes to the horizon. Instead of miles upon miles of forest that surrounded Aurora Academy’s multiple campuses, there was a vast, black stone mountain that blocked our view of anything else.

No, it wasn’t a mountain... A longer examination showed signs of a man-made structure, swirled carvings decorating the surface that were only visible from the shadows created by the sun. Whatever it was, it wasn’t naturally made.

‘What the fuck?’ Oz breathed out beside me and I mirrored the sentiment.

We watched as bodies started streaming out from the surrounding buildings, each of them gawking at the new structure with dazed expressions, blood dripping from their faces much the same as us.

Oz and I shared a heavy look, our trepidation clear, but when our hands clasped together in a silent promise that whatever was happening we were in it together, I felt our strength and resilience rise up between us. I had a feeling we were going to need it.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 4:06 am

Phenex

‘P henex! Are you even listening?’

I shook my errant thoughts free as I refocused on my brother’s perpetually annoyed expression. I tended to zone out whenever he sought me out lately. ‘I’m sorry, what was that?’

He huffed, his disapproval of my wandering mind a constant point of contention between us. ‘I said the academy is under lock down.’

I frowned at that. I may not have bothered leaving the academy much myself, but I knew others enjoyed their freedom from these stone walls. Carved from the volcanic rock of the Sixth Circle’s hottest volcano, it was black and oppressive to most, though I found what others considered gloomy to be rather homely and soothing on the senses. There was far too much debauchery among our people that included bright lights, heavy scents, and other assaults on the senses that I enjoyed the dark, still silence of the academy.

The library was a particular favourite of mine, which was where my oldest brother and reluctant professor had hunted me down to deliver this news.

Actually, now that I thought about it, I took back my nonchalance. It was not good news. My sanctuary of solitude would be disrupted if everyone was condemned to stay put. I’d never find a moment of peace.

But that then raised the next question I vocalised.

‘Why?’ My brother’s long-suffering exasperation was nothing new to me, but there was something about it this time that struck me as different. ‘What’s going on?’

‘Honestly, Phenex. It’s a wonder you’ve survived this long when you don’t even notice the entire academy being transported to a completely different realm,’ he snapped, but my body jerking back wasn’t in response to his tone but rather my shock at his admission.

‘We’re no longer in the Seven Circles?’ I asked, needing confirmation, and he shook his head no. ‘Then where are we?’

‘That is still to be determined, little brother. Now, head back to your room. A curfew has been enacted.’

I nodded once, hurrying to gather my books to carry with me back to my room. My brother attempted to walk with me back to my room, though I wasn’t sure why. There was no need to ensure I went, since there wasn’t anywhere else I would go. It all became clear, however, when I opened my door to find a naked succubus writhing on my bedsheets, scarlet fingers already deep inside her slick entrance. The sound they made as she plunged them in and out of herself was lewd and kind of revolting, though my repulsion stemmed from my lack of interest in this particular Daemon. The same Daemon that had saturated my sheets with her slick too many times to count, just as she was doing now.

A wet patch had formed beneath her, staining my sheets both in colour and scent.

Great. Now I would need to change them before I could sleep tonight.

I cast a slide-long glare at my brother, annoyed with these continuous, underhanded tactics.

‘Qarinah, we shall have to postpone our agreement to another time,’ my brother informed her, but even though she heard him her eyes remained on mine while her fingers continued their ministrations, the wet slap of her palm against her clit making me cringe.

‘The academy is under lockdown and a curfew has been enacted. You must return to your own room immediately,’ my brother finished, and the seductress on my bed pouted. Still, her fingers continued strumming her clit while the other hand plucked at onyx nipples until her hips were bucking and she was screaming my name through her release. She continued to hold my gaze hostage with her crimson eyes, heavy-lidded with lust and longing as she shuddered through her pleasure. She looked to me from beneath her eyelashes in what she considered a desirable expression. It didn’t work on me, just like the many times others had tried.

When she got no reaction from me other than my top lip curling at the drenched, wrinkled mess she’d made of my bedsheets, she turned to my brother, no doubt ready to throw a strop. ‘Abaddon, he’s still not responding to me,’ she whined.

My brother sighed. ‘It was worth a try. Thank you, Qarinah. Phenex will no longer be needing your services tonight, but we shall try again another day. Now, off to your room before you’re out after curfew.’

He ushered her out the door, chucking her clothing at her as she left and I didn’t miss the come-fuck-me eyes she sent his way, the trail her fingers took across his chest as she passed him, nor the extra sway in her bare hips as she sauntered down the hallway. He watched, his own eyes dark with lust until she turned the corner with clear intent shining through that told me he was going to fuck her if I didn’t (and probably already had), and then he faced me.

‘This is getting out of hand, little brother. You need a real woman, not some fantasy you’ve conjured inside your head. Humans aren’t even real,’ he chastised, but I didn’t

want to hear it. We'd been over this countless times, my regret over confessing my dreams to him worsening each time.

'Whatever, Don. I won't apologise for having standards that involve at least some modicum of class, and I can't help it if Succubae simply fail to pique my interest. Not everyone wants an easy lay,' I rebuffed his derision.

Again, just like every other time we'd had this argument, he completely ignored my wants and desires in favour of his own.

'We're Daemons, little brother. Daemons from the House of Greed. We take what we want and we don't apologise for it. It's past time you started to do the same,' he admonished, but his words merely ran off me like water through my fingers. What he didn't understand was that I completely agreed with him. The difference was that what I wanted didn't match up with what our family and our house believed I should want.

As a Djinn my power was gifted to whomever I had sex with. When I deposited my seed inside them I also left behind a piece of my own magic they could do with as they wished. For that reason I was incredibly picky about whom I gave that power to. That wasn't to say I was completely innocent. I had experimented with both men and women up to a point (as long as my seed stayed far away from other people I was in the clear), and while both were okay, nothing really struck me as worthwhile. There was always something missing, and for the longest time I hadn't been able to figure out what it was.

Until the dreams started.

Every night, I dreamt of a woman of myth. Short with a delicate build, hair that looked almost black until the sun highlighted its dark green hues that cascaded down in waves over small, round ears, vivid blue eyes unlike anything I had ever seen, and

skin a silky cream colour that would have contrasted beautifully with the lilac tones of my own skin. I dreamed of dusty pink nipples just begging to be sucked, dainty fingers spreading her glistening, pink pussy lips just for my viewing pleasure. Sometimes, I swore I could even scent her, a delicious floral muskiness that reminded me of the earth, though there were hints of other scents in there, too that I could never quite place.

She entered my dreams every night, and I awoke each morning with my cock stiff and needy to plunge into her hot, sweet depths. She was everything I could have ever possibly wanted in a partner, if only she wasn't a figment of my imagination. She was the only one I could ever envision gifting my power to.

I understood my family's concern, I really did, but that didn't change the fact that my heart was taken. I had come to terms with the fact that I would never find anyone tangible to build a life with and I didn't hold it against my brother for attempting to help, but there was nothing to be done.

I was in love with a woman who did not exist, and I was okay with that because she existed to me . At least this way I could hoard her and keep my power all to myself. And that, right there, was where my Greed came into play.

I placed the books neatly on the bookshelf that took up the majority of my room. The rooms were rather standard when we first moved in, but we were allowed to make it our own as long as we could take it down when we vacated after graduation. I had built my bookshelves from scratch after finding the materials lying around. Many Daemons from other factions tossed out perfectly good materials simply because they did not use them, but part of my house made me a bit of a hoarder. I loved to collect things that I could turn into something better. Something useful. Something I could use to store the other things I collected, namely my books. I may have taken this particular collection from the academy's library, but I had zero intentions of giving them back. They were mine now.

I adjusted the spines one last time and then stepped back, admiring my work and letting the scent of the books soothe me before I ended up bathed in the scent of Qarinah's arousal. It was stale now, and a little overpowering, the stench burning my nostrils as I was forced to inhale it. I would have held my breath, but it would have been no use. A succubus' scent was made to linger, to entice, so I would be stuck with it until I could air out my room properly. Since we had no windows and I didn't want to risk leaving my door open for just anyone to walk in, it was going to take a week or two at least.

Damn you, Abaddon, I mentally cursed my brother. He meant well, but his meddling was doing more harm than good.

I wrinkled my nose as I stripped the sheets, deciding it was best to just burn them rather than try to wash out the stench. Qarinah was known for her spectacularly potent scent-marking abilities, and I would likely never completely remove it if I could even manage to remove any at all. Especially with the way she kept adding to it.

Fucking Abaddon. Fucking Succubae. Why couldn't they just let me live out my imaginary love story in peace?

Once my bed was remade, I rolled myself in it to try to replace the sickly sweet scent of Qarinah's come with my own musk, though all that succeeded in doing was merging the two so my entire room smelled like we'd been fucking. My stomach roiled in disgust.

With a heaving sigh, I resigned myself to unpleasant living conditions and chose to get some sleep for the night. There would be no Daemons in my dreams. Only a delicious little human woman that I would devour until morning came. I could do with a good orgasm or two before I was forced to deal with whatever nightmare awaited us all outside the academy walls. It should also help cover up the stench.

I stripped out of my shirt and pants, tossing them into the pile in the corner of the room that I used to collect my dirty laundry, then climbed under the clean sheets. They were still a little damp from their previous wash, but I would take a little dampness from water over Qarinah any day. Unfortunately, it wasn't enough. I couldn't get comfortable with her scent clogging up my nose, so I reached over onto the little bedside shelf carved from the same black volcanic rock the rest of the academy was made from, the little lip jutting out from the wall in a platform only just wide enough to rest a few essential items on while I slept. I grabbed the book from the top of the pile, opened it, and placed it over my face. The slightly musty scent of the old pages worked their magic to give me something better to fill my nostrils which allowed me to finally relax.

My eyes closed, my breaths evened out, and my cock went rigid as I anticipated reuniting with the woman of my dreams.

???

I awoke with my hips pistoning against my mattress. I had somehow turned in my sleep so I was face down against my pillow, my cock grinding into my bed as I desperately sought more friction against the sensitive protrusion.

Images of dark green hair wrapped around my fist, milky white skin and beautifully glistening pinkness bombarded me and I groaned. The sound was low, deep, and frustrated since my woman was no longer with me. In my dreams I could touch her, taste her, bring her as much pleasure as she brought me, but then I would wake up and she would slip through my fingers like the slippery sands of Siren's Beach.

But the memory of her still lingered. Her sweet little gasps, her wide-eyed innocence that just begged to be corrupted. Her adorable little pink tongue poking out to moisten plump, reddened lips, bruised from my kisses, lips I wanted wrapped around my cock as she sucked. A tongue I wanted to taste my essence as I spilled down her throat.

My breaths came in pants as my balls tingled, my thighs quivering with my fast approaching release.

‘Fuuuuuck,’ I moaned as spurt after spurt tore from my sacks and shot from my tip.

I collapsed down, breathing heavily as I tried to catch my breath. My releases were always insanely powerful after a night spent with my imaginary Human lover, and I didn’t care that I was now splayed out on top of the wet patch. I had learned a long time ago not to wear even a stitch of clothing to bed for it would just end up covered in my sweat and my seed. It saved on laundry, but I was going to need to change my sheets again before tonight.

That could wait, though. My scent was beginning to overpower Qarinah’s, which was a blessing in disguise. Maybe I could sleep another night on sullied sheets if it got rid of any remnant of her.

A knock at the door interrupted my thoughts, and I hurriedly scrambled to wipe myself down and make myself presentable for when I answered the door.

‘Just a minute!’ I called, racing to stretch my shirt over my head and pull up my pants.

I ran my fingers through my mussed hair in a feeble attempt to smooth it out, but I kept stabbing my horns so I eventually gave up, checked I was at least presentable enough for polite company in the mirror, then shrugged when I saw my state of disarray. To be fair, I had just woken up. What could they really say?

As satisfied as I was ever going to be, I opened the door to Abaddon’s smiling face. A smile that did not reach his eyes and sent alarm darting through my veins, tensing my muscles as my body prepared for a threat.

‘What is it?’ I asked, choosing to forego pleasantries.

‘Classes have been cancelled for the day. An assembly has been called. All students and faculty must meet in the Atrium in an hour,’ he said, then patted me on the shoulder and moved onto the next room.

I stopped him before he could knock. ‘Why are you going room to room?’

His lips pursed in a grim expression. ‘Each floor has been assigned a supervisor. This is my assigned floor. You’ll learn more about that at the assembly.’

I nodded once to indicate my understanding, then closed the door to finish getting myself ready. I couldn’t decide what it was that I was feeling, exactly; if it was a remnant of my orgasm or fear for the unknown, but my stomach swooped with anticipation. Whatever was happening, I could feel it in every atom of my being that our world was about to be turned upside down.

I thought back to the woman that awaited me in my dreams and wondered, no... hoped that the impossible would come true and the coming events would somehow bring her into existence. I chose in that moment to believe. In her, in us, and in a future where we were more than just a few stolen moments inside my head.

Was I being delusional? It was highly likely, but I didn’t care. I had been plagued by what I longed for being just out of reach for so long now that I couldn’t help but latch onto the possibility of my dreams coming true.

I didn’t know why my thoughts took such a turn. It was dangerous to hope for a make-believe future, but I simply couldn’t help myself. My intuition was screaming at me that this was it. This was my chance to find her, to make my dreams a reality.

I could feel it.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 4:06 am

Juniper

I had to wait until the rest of the dorm had cleared out before I could sneak out of Oz's room, the spell ensuring we kept our connection a secret forcing me to take drastic measures to ensure it remained so. That was why I was currently climbing through a window, rope attached firmly in place in order to scale the back of the building where the rest of the academy couldn't see. You know, since they were all gathered to gawp at the giant black structure on the other side.

My foot slipped on a particularly slippery brick, apparently having rained sometime last night while we slept, and I cursed. I cursed for my current predicament, for the spell that was causing said current predicament, and for the strange events that were happening. It would have been foolish to believe that a bright light, a loud noise, and a mysterious mountainous structure would be the end of it. No, something big was happening. Something none of us could have ever predicted.

But what?

I was just as eager as everyone else to get a closer look at the strange new addition, but I was stuck escaping Oz's dorm building like a damn thief that accidentally fell asleep on the job, the sun shining directing on me (and in my eyes) to highlight how much I wasn't supposed to be where I was.

We were going to have to find a better way to end our Friday night sleepovers, because this was getting ridiculous.

Finally, my feet touched the ground and I almost bowed down and kissed it. Scaling a

multi-storey building wasn't really too much of an effort for me, at least physically. I may have been sweating with the effort, my breaths sawing in and out of my lungs as adrenaline worked its way back out of my shaking body, but it wasn't from exertion. I worked out plenty to give me the strength and stamina to keep myself from falling to my death, so that wasn't the issue. No, my problem was that I wasn't exactly the biggest fan of heights. I could handle most things other people feared, like snakes and spiders and public speaking. But heights? They left me a quivering, hyperventilating mess.

Nope. Not for me.

After catching my breath and lowering my blood pressure, I jogged around the dorm building to where the crowd had gathered on the other side, my lungs seizing when I once again laid eyes upon the black mass taking up a significant portion of our already vast academy grounds. It was an imposing structure, the black of the rock so dark it would have been impossible to pick out the intricate, swirling designs that proved it wasn't a natural formation but a hand-carved behemoth.

'Junie!' a shrill, feminine voice, one I knew well, called my name.

I turned to find my roommate, Kendra, heading straight for me, hazel eyes wide and flashing with disbelief and uncertainty. Her wild red curls waved dramatically around her face and shoulders almost like they were taking on a life of their own as the breeze blew thick strands in front of her face that she kept batting away with frustration. I wouldn't have called us friends, exactly, though she was nice in a shallow way. She just wasn't the most trustworthy person on the planet. Her big mouth got not only herself but countless others into trouble whether she meant to or not. It was the largest reason I kept an emotional distance between us. I couldn't let someone like her get too close because my secrets wouldn't stay so secret for long under her care, but we had fun together on occasion.

Which was why I struggled to understand why she was storming in my direction like hellhounds were snapping at her heels and she wanted to sic them on me instead, her face twisting into a thunderous scowl as she surged towards me. Even though we were friendly, even she knew we weren't and never would be close, but she had never behaved like this toward to me before. I felt like I was missing something.

'How insane is this?' I pointed towards the large black thing in an attempt to draw the attention away from me and back onto the real important matter. When it didn't work, trepidation had me taking a step back when she halted far too close and got right up in my face.

'Don't you give me that, missy. Where were you?' she snapped, and I felt like a little kid with my hand caught in the cookie jar. She couldn't possibly have any clue... right?

'What do you mean?' I hedged, taking another step backwards as if physical distance would save me from her wrath.

'Don't play dumb with me, Juniper. You didn't come back to our room last night and this happens? What did you do?' she accused, her voice whipping through the crowd and silencing the mutterings in a wave as they caught onto the potential of a fight. Or answers, though they were looking to the wrong person for those.

'Not that I owe you an explanation, but I was with a... friend,' I argued my case, internally wincing when I caught Oz's eye in the mass of bodies and we both realised how that sounded. If anyone figured out I was spending my Friday nights with him, they would now assume we were sleeping together. Blech.

'You're missing from our room every Friday night and you don't come back until after lunch on Saturdays. It's like some sort of weird ritual or something,' she continued throwing the accusations, each one feeling like a nail hammering into my

coffin. Not because she was right, but because there was no way for me to defend myself with this damn spell silencing me. My stomach churned when the mutterings started back up, this time aimed at me.

‘And now this!’ she gestured vaguely behind her towards the black structure. ‘This is your fault. I just know it.’

‘Now, hang on a minute,’ I started, but another voice cut me off.

‘How could she have had anything to do with this?’ a familiar handsome face appeared between us. My stomach twisted for an entirely different reason when Hawthorne Ramil stepped forward to block me from the verbal attack. Brown hair slightly too long on the top flopped over his forehead and into his eyes, uncharacteristically unstyled, though I didn’t blame him. Most of us were out here still in our pyjamas, not willing to change in favour of getting a front-row seat to whatever was going on, and I didn’t miss the way his flannel pants hung off his slim but toned hips, clinging to his ass in a way that made me want to both bite it and pull it the rest of the way down to reveal those pert glutes for my viewing pleasure.

He was also Oz’s best friend, a man I’d been secretly crushing on for years but never even knew I existed.

At least, I hadn’t thought he knew I existed...

I wrinkled my nose in disdain when her demeanour immediately softened into something more flirtatious and less combative as soon as he appeared, my opinion of her lowering further than I ever thought it could go. It wasn’t that I had ever considered her a malicious or negative individual, but I was seeing a whole new side to her that I didn’t like. I didn’t like it at all.

Plus, she needed to stop ogling Hawthorne. That was my thing.

‘Thorne,’ she simpered, moving closer so that they were almost touching while batting her lashes at him. ‘You don’t understand. She never tells me where she’s going, what she’s doing, and then this happens? It’s the only explanation. She has to be responsible somehow.’

‘Has anything happened before when she spent the night away from her room?’ he retorted, but she wasn’t cowed.

‘She must have been planning. Can’t you see it? She’s been cavorting with the devil this whole time!’

Snorts of disbelief sounded throughout the gathered crowd, even from me, and a few people even turned away from the altercation. I supposed when someone started spouting bullshit about devil worshipers as a legitimate source of a mystery people started to lose interest.

Hawthorne’s unimpressed expression must have matched my own, his square jaw clenched and the muscles ticking as he ground his teeth. ‘I highly doubt that, Kendra,’ he deadpanned. Many humans believed that witchcraft or sorcery or whatever name they wanted to call it was borne from Hell, that magic was Demonic in nature and anyone who participated in it was evil. Those that believed in the supernatural, anyway. Most just dismissed it all as a bunch of hocus pocus, which was exactly how we in the magical community viewed the Devil. We had our religion, the proof of it a tangible thing running through our veins and clear to see after we perform an actual ritual.

Devil worshipping... Absolutely ridiculous.

I pushed passed Hawthorne, eager to take back the reins and put this bitch in her place. ‘I don’t know what you think you’re getting out of this, throwing around accusations like that, but you sound like an idiot.’ I levelled her with my most

disappointed look, attempting to emulate the one my mother had perfected while raising me. ‘We may not have been close, but I never would have expected this from you.’

She looked around as if to gather back-up from the bystanders, but when she realised she’d lost her audience her entire demeanour switched up yet again and she turned a sneer on me that I had only ever seen her throw at people she’d deemed beneath her. Until now, I had never made that list. Or perhaps I had, and I’d just never noticed her going behind my back.

Now that I thought about it, after this interaction the latter was the more likely conclusion.

With a shrug, because you couldn’t win over everyone, I dismissed her and tried to give Hawthorne a grateful smile, but all I caught was the back of his head as he was already walking away. My heart sank, but I refused to let it show. Hawthorne was one of the most sought-after Warlocks at Aurora Academy. He always had been. And while he’d had his fair share of the female population in his bed if the rumours were correct, I had never even managed to find myself even a blip on his radar.

With a disappointed sigh, I left Kendra behind as I headed deeper into the mass of confused and curious Witches and Warlocks. I kept Oz in my sights (and Hawthorne, since my twin was whom he’d stalked off to after that altercation, not that I was complaining about the eye candy), and moved closer to the front lines of the crowd. Professors had already accumulated towards the edge of the clearing to discuss our next move. I nodded at a few who taught at the middle school alongside me, but as I was still a grad student there was a divide that kept our relationship purely professional so I didn’t try to join them.

I would wait until they called upon me and the other older students for assistance, but until then I didn’t want to get in their way.

Another body came to stand beside mine as we stared up at the giant thing that had replaced the forest surrounding academy lands, but I didn't adjust my gaze to see who it was. A pang of sadness passed through me at the loss of so much life. There would have been countless animals living amongst the foliage, all wiped out and for what? What was the purpose of summoning such a thing here?

I just couldn't think of any possible explanation.

'Alright, folks!' the Dean emerged from within the circle of staff, his arms spread wide as he addressed us all. 'Time to head back inside. Stay in your dorm buildings until otherwise instructed. Let us investigate these strange happenings without needing to worry about you causing any more problems by poking around, yes?' he half joked, earning a few half-hearted chuckles from us. He wasn't wrong and we knew it.

I turned on my heel and headed back towards my dorm building as soon as he'd dismissed us, eager to get away from the overwhelming sense of foreboding the emanated from the windowless, black skyscraper.

Or perhaps it wasn't the structure itself but those strange, swirling markings. They looked decorative from a first-glance standpoint, but after another look with the sun shining directly on them, visible more so through shadows than the actual carvings themselves, they struck me as odd. There was a system to them I couldn't outright decipher, but I'd noticed it only because it was reminiscent of the Fae language Oz and I had been decoding.

I would bet that they were words, not just pretty pictures, and if we could figure out what it said then maybe we could get ourselves some answers.

'Miss Olwyn, if you wouldn't mind staying behind, please,' Dean Winters called me to a halt. I did as I was told, heading back towards the circle of staff members though

I remained on the outskirts. I may have been a twenty-four year old grad student with a job teaching at the middle school, but these Witches and Warlocks were far older and more experienced than me, so even being in their presence made me feel like a little kid trying on my mother's far-too-big heels with lipstick smeared all over the lower half of my face.

I relaxed a little when the dean called more of us over and Oz took up position a few spaces to my right. It seemed we were being included as staff since we technically were, even if we were still students as well. I wondered what tasks we would be given, though I tried not to feel too guilty when I worried it would cut into my research with Oz. That was something that had been going on for years already, and we were hardly any closer to figuring out a way to free ourselves from our curse.

As with anything else in life, it seemed we were going to continue having to jump through hoops to get the answers we sought. Firey hoops that dangled one hundred feet in the air and moved as soon as we got close, because nothing could ever be simple for us.

He was worth it, though, so I would do it without complaint.

I wish they would just hurry up. We've got more important things to do than stand around and wait for them to get their thumbs out of their asses, Oz's voice rang out and I glanced at him from the corner of my eye in confusion. Why was he speaking so disrespectfully in front of the very people he was referring to?

Dammit, I could have been deciphering Old Fae if it wasn't for this shit. I hope Junie's okay after scaling the building. And her roommate is a bitch. I never should have fucked her. Though she did do that thing with her tongue...

I tried my hardest to keep the shock and repulsion from my face. His lips weren't moving. He wasn't speaking out loud. I'd just heard my brother's thoughts, and I

wanted to be sick. I didn't even want to acknowledge what I'd just learned, far too stunned with his voice in my head over the content.

I wasn't given the opportunity to ignore it, however, because his thoughts went down a rabbit hole of horniness that was traumatising for a sister to hear. I tried to tune him out as he continued reminiscing over not only the things my roommate did to him but what he'd done to her, and I was feeling thoroughly sickened. With this new development, I decided to try and see if it worked both ways if only to stop him from continuing down this avenue of thought because I couldn't take another second of it.

'Oz!' I attempted to push the thought towards him. When he winced like I'd shouted in his ear and his head whipped around to stare at me, the whites of his eyes showing in his shock, I almost did a happy dance that it worked.

'Junie...?'

'Apparently we can hear each other's thoughts now, so I would appreciate it if you stopped thinking about my soon-to-be ex roommate's naked body and the things she can do with her tongue.'

'Oh, fuck... How?'

'I don't know, Ozzie, but now's not the time,' I darted my eyes towards where Dean Winters was circling back around in our direction. I got the sense he was nodding his head in acknowledgement, but his head didn't actually move. It was an odd sensation that jolted me out of reality for a moment, my head swimming with everything that had happened in such a short space of time.

What next? I thought to myself dejectedly, though I realised Oz had caught it when his shoulder shrugged almost imperceptibly in response.

That sense of foreboding grew as the dean practically jogged back towards us, concern shining in his tired brown eyes. He glanced between us then gestured for those of us he'd just gathered to circle around.

‘Alright. You may still be students, but as teachers you also have a responsibility towards your students. You will be reassigned a new room in the lower schools’ dorms to keep the younger ones calm and in line. Hopefully, they won’t need protection but you will be their first line of defence if the need arises. In the meantime, all other faculty members from across the campuses will be conducting an investigation. We are entrusting you with the safety and wellbeing of our younger students. Please take that seriously.’

He waved three professors over, one from each of the campuses. ‘These fine Witches will be assigning you your new rooms. Please pack only what is necessary and retrieve your keys as soon as possible. They will be waiting for you in the dorms.’

‘ At least we’ll be closer and have a better reason to be seen together,’ Oz’s voice sounded in my head again and I forced myself not to outwardly startle. It felt weird, like someone trying to stroke my brain from inside my skull and it sent shivers across my skin, my hair standing on end.

I answered as we were departing to collect our belongings, pleased with the way things were suddenly turning in my favour. ‘We’ll just need to be careful not to draw attention to the fact we never speak out loud to one another, or our newfound ability to communicate mentally,’ I warned.

‘ Do you think it’s a side-effect of whatever is going on?’ he asked. ‘ What if it’s only temporary?’

‘ Then nothing’s really changed. If this is a side-effect then we’ll deal with it, but I’m not going to look a gift-horse in the mouth. I can talk to you around others without

anyone knowing, and our secret will remain safe. I'm not seeing any down sides to it so far, besides losing a big chunk of the forest to a massive black mountain. Maybe it's not a bad thing?'

He mulled it over before responding, pausing momentarily before we had to go our separate ways. ' We need to be cautious, Junie. We don't know what's going on, and we don't know how this is affecting us. Hell, someone else could already be listening in and we just don't know it.'

All very valid points that I hadn't even considered yet. ' Okay, let's pack our things and get settled into the middle school dorms and then we can get together tonight and see if we can work out a plan.'

' Good idea. I'll see you soon.'

My fingers twitched with the urge to wave goodbye as he turned his back on me and headed in the opposite direction. It was going to be so nice to live in the same building, at least for the time being. I could feel it the longer our curse kept us apart, the need to be close to him. There was a pull that couldn't be ignored but we couldn't act on, and though it had grated on us for many years, it was starting to become painful. Headaches, insomnia, a physical link that seemed to want to tear from our chests the longer we were apart.

I may have been cautious about what was happening, I wasn't afraid, and though that was likely incredibly naive, I couldn't help but be grateful for it. Whatever it was, it was giving us the opportunity to hopefully soothe our fractured bond, so I was going to thank whatever Gods were responsible and jump into what came next with both feet, a smile on my face and my brother by my side.

My gut was screaming at me that this was our chance. We were on the cusp of uncovering everything that was keeping us apart, I just knew it.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 4:06 am

Oswald

A knock rapped on the other side of my door as I was zipping up my third suitcase. I finished my task before opening it to find Enid and Hawthorne ready to barge in as soon as the door was open.

‘What the hell, Oz?’ Enid demanded, and I frowned at her in confusion.

‘What?’

‘What is going on?’

I huffed, annoyed with her. We may have been friends, but it was Thorne that was the glue. Without him, I doubted I’d have the patience or willpower to suffer through her constant whining. Sure, we got along for the most part, but times like these I just wanted to throttle her.

‘I know as much as you do, Enid. Why do you automatically assume I know more?’

‘Because Kendra was right about one thing, Oz. Where were you last night?’

My nostrils flared as anger drilled through me, but I pushed it down with some deep breaths. ‘I was in my room just like every other Friday night, Enid. Why are you coming at me like this?’

‘Was she here, too? Are you fucking Juniper?’

The accusation landed like an arrow to the chest. My breath stalled for a beat before I composed myself, shutting down all emotion to avoid detection.

‘No. I’m not fucking Juniper,’ I snapped, eyeing Thorne warily. That was an accusation that could damage our friendship and was the only reason I had for not wanting to break this curse separating me and Junie. If we ever did manage to successfully release ourselves from the curse, I wasn’t sure how he would react to me hiding the fact that it was Juniper, of all people.

‘There’s no way Oz would fuck Juniper, Enid. Don’t go trying to start shit where there isn’t any,’ Thorne retorted, his tone harsh. Junie really was a sore spot for him, and it killed me to see him hurting like this and not be able to do anything about it.

Junie would kill me too if she ever found out, but at least she would’ve understood my silence.

‘This is ridiculous. Why are you even here?’ I snapped at the both of them. I knew Thorne didn’t deserve it, but Enid was getting on my nerves and he’d brought her here. I punctuated my annoyance with the thud of my suitcase as I dropped it onto the floor by the door.

‘We were worried about you,’ Thorne cut in before any sound could come from Enid’s mouth. It was times like this when I reconsidered the value of our friendship. It was becoming clearer to me that the only reason I even tolerated her was because Thorne wanted her around. He was my best friend so I kept my mouth shut, but I hated the way she thought she owned the two of us.

I was tired of her treating my friend like a prize she’d won (she hadn’t) while I was the spare she was forced to interact with by extension. Fuck that. She was the damn spare. The fact that she was even in here accusing me of sleeping with Juniper behind his back told me she knew exactly where she stood in his heart. I just couldn’t

understand why that didn't stop her from trying to push him for a committed relationship when she knew it was never going to happen.

Mind. Boggling.

'Why were you worried about me?' I asked him, pointedly ignored Enid's glare.

He gave me a look that encompassed everything. Yes, it was a stupid question. 'Right, well I'm okay. Nothing to speak of unless you want to talk about the giant black mountain that's suddenly appeared out of nowhere.'

'Where are you going?' he asked, gesturing towards my suitcases.

'Dean Winchester asked those of us who teach to move into the other dorms while they conduct an investigation into what's going on. I'm moving into the middle school dorm to keep an eye on the kids.'

He frowned. 'Just the student teachers?'

'Yeah. They don't want us on the front lines since we're still technically students ourselves, but since we've already got one degree under our belts and we're officially employed as staff, I guess the dean figured it was best to station us away from any potential danger while still being able to protect the young ones.'

'Do you have any idea what's going on?' he asked, concern etching deep grooves into his face.

I shook my head. 'No. Not a clue.'

'I have a weird feeling about this,' he admitted. 'Whatever this is, it's big, and it's not over.'

‘I agree,’ I said grimly, my gaze drifting to the window where the giant dark mass loomed over the academy. ‘It’s far from over.’

‘Let me at least help you carry your bags to your new room. Help you get settled,’ he offered.

I shrugged and hauled the heaviest one to him. ‘Be my guest.’

Enid’s head snapped up from where she’d been not-so-sneakily snooping, eagerly running over to take my suitcase from Thorne. ‘I can help, too.’

We shared a look that spoke volumes of how annoying she was if she was getting on his nerves now, too. He had the patience of a damn saint, so it took a lot to push him over the edge. I smirked when she shrugged and let her take the luggage, and he rose a single brow when she began to heave it out of the room.

‘I’ve got it if it’s too heavy for you, Enid,’ he offered, and I wanted to face-palm. He needed to stop coddling the woman and let her go already.

‘No,’ she huffed. ‘It’s fine,’ she grunted. ‘I’ve got it!’

We waited until she’d dragged the suitcase further down the hallway, stopping and starting as she caught her breath before we spoke again.

‘Why her, man?’ I complained.

He lifted a shoulder, unbothered by the question or the answer. ‘I know she’s changed a lot since we were kids, but she’s not as bad as you think.’

‘She wants to take things beyond friends-with-benefits,’ I told him. ‘She’s not looking to be a fuck buddy forever. She wants commitment. Your commitment.’

‘She knows the score. We’re friends first, Oz. Everything else is just a bonus. I’m not stopping her from finding a boyfriend and I’m certainly not leading her on. She knows it’s just sex for me.’

‘Does she, though? She might have accepted that before, but it’s clear she wants more.’

‘She hasn’t pushed me for anything. If she does, I’ll put a stop to it, but until then I don’t see how it’s any of your business,’ he gave me a pointed look that told me to shut up and keep my nose out of it.

I winced. ‘I just care, man. You can do so much better than her.’

‘I don’t care about that. Sex is just sex, and we all know my heart is already taken.’

I sighed, not wanting to continue this argument. I knew he was hearing me but I didn’t think he fully understood the lengths Enid would go to secure him as her mate.

Not on my watch.

Conversation over, I grabbed one suitcase while he grabbed the other and we followed Enid into the hallway, locking my door behind me. I didn’t know when I’d be back, but I wasn’t going to miss it. It wasn’t home.

Enid had just called the elevator when we caught up, her face red and bloated from the strain of my heaviest bag. I sighed as I watched her almost hyperventilate from the effort of dragging it and switched hers with mine. It wasn’t that I was being nice. If I wanted to get settled into my new room sometime today I didn’t want to have to wait for her since she was insisting on helping. This way, she could carry my underwear while I carried my books. The latter were more important to me anyway.

‘What the fuck do you even have in there?’ she panted.

‘Books.’

‘Just books? That’s it?’

‘Yup.’

‘Why do you have so many?’ she complained.

‘Because I like to read and I enjoy knowledge. You might want to try it sometime.’

Her face went from bright red to a deep purple in her self-righteous anger, and I worried she might actually pass out if I wasn’t careful. Thorne noticed, too, and hurried to help her with breathing exercises to get her heartrate back down.

‘You two are as bad as each other,’ he chuckled, somehow finding amusement in our feud. ‘Now stop bickering. I haven’t even had my coffee yet and I’m starving. I don’t want to play referee all morning. Now let’s be friends again and get these suitcases where they need to be.’

It didn’t escape my notice when she winced at the label, obviously not the one she wanted. I wanted to laugh, but I held it in. Thorne was right. This wasn’t the time to rile her up.

We all piled into the elevator and it was a tight squeeze with my oversized luggage. Unfortunately, I ended up squished between the suitcases and Enid, her body pressed against mine in what many would have considered a provocative manner, except it just made me want to crawl out of my own skin. Her nipples even pebbled through her shirt and brushed against my side, but there was no space for me to move away.

She blushed, a pretty pink colour I might have found adorable on another woman, but I was never the kind of guy to go after a friend's sloppy seconds so I pretended not to notice, least of all her. I wasn't a gentleman by any means, but I found myself constantly acting like one around her in my efforts to keep my distance. She misinterpreted it frequently, to the point where I thought she actually believed I sniped at her out of jealousy since she was fucking Thorne and not me, but that was as far from the truth as she could get.

I could see Thorne holding in his amusement as he watched us like we were his own person sit-com. I levelled him with my best glare, but he only wiggled his eyebrows in response.

Bastard.

The walk to the middle school dorms from the university campus was a vaguely pleasant one. There was a comfortable silence between the three of us as we trudged along, the only sound that of the whispers we could hear from open windows and the wheels on the suitcases on the path with the occasional scratch when one got caught on a loose stone.

Each of us ignored the looming height of the strange new structure, though it was difficult to when it was blocking out the sunlight from what would have typically been a sunny, warm morning walk. The shade wasn't bad, though, with the weather still hot enough from the last dregs of summer, just unusual for this time of day.

The world brightened for me again when I saw a familiar head of dark green hair, chosen because it was literally the colour she was named after. Well, she was named after the plant, but the colour was on the box. Juniper was dragging two large suitcases behind her, both of them almost dwarfing her short frame with their sheer size. It was an amusing sight, though my concern over her lugging such large bags that she was obviously struggling with overshadowed any humour I found in the

situation. I could tease her about it later, after she was situated in her new room.

I picked up the pace and caught up to her quickly, Hawthorne and Enid hurrying along behind me. I grabbed one of her suitcases from her grip before she could protest, but she simply wiped perspiration off her forehead, tucked a wayward strand of hair behind her ear and smiled up at me with gratitude.

‘ Thanks,’ she whispered into my mind. I was still trying to wrap my head around that. I wasn’t going to complain about being able to communicate with her in a way that didn’t put pressure on our curse, but I certainly wasn’t going to just accept it for a blessing even if that was exactly what she was doing, because those were usually a disguise for something more nefarious. Still, I didn’t see any harm in taking advantage for the time being, as long as we were cautious. I meant what I said before. We didn’t know if anyone else was experiencing the same phenomenon. I didn’t want us to accidentally give away our secrets to someone we didn’t know was eavesdropping. We were going to need to test the people around us to ensure our mental connection was closed and private, just between us.

I was sure we’d have some fun with it, though.

Professor Sweeney greeted us as we entered the dorm building, a crowd of middle schoolers accumulating behind her to gawk curiously at the new arrivals. A few of them waved when they recognised us, eyeing our luggage with keen-eyed interest. Most of them were unaware that we were still pursuing our own educations, their pre-teen minds focused solely on their own paths so they assumed we were merely teachers. I knew for a fact that they thought I lived in the Faculty Village, and I hadn’t done a thing to dissuade them. There were a few girls in my class that liked to flirt, and while I didn’t acknowledge it I also wasn’t oblivious. High-pitched giggles and not-so-quiet whispers as they gossiped about me, during class I might add, did not leave any doubt that they thought I was a catch.

Junie teased me about it constantly as she heard them gossiping in her classes as well, but she thought it was sweet and told me to take it as a compliment, so I tried to. I wasn't exactly eager for the attention of teeny boppers, but alas, here we were.

'Follow me to your new rooms,' she waved for us to follow and took off down the hallway. It had been a long time since I'd walked these halls, but I remembered where everything was. They'd upgraded the furniture in the rec rooms and there was a fresh coat of paint on the walls, but beyond that everything was the same.

'We've moved some students around so that you can have adjacent rooms. Juniper, yours is on the left closest to the girls' dorms, and Oswald, yours is on the right by the boys' dorms.' She handed us each a key. 'Get yourselves settled. You're the only grad students that have taken on positions in the middle school so you're all they've got for now. I've already provided a list of responsibilities that you'll find inside on your desks. Read through them, abide by them, and good luck.'

She rushed away, likely needed elsewhere to help the rest of the staff with the investigation. Either way, we were left to our own devices and that suited me just fine. I hated when people lingered unnecessarily.

'Right, let's get these bags in your rooms, hmm?' Thorne muttered, taking the key from my hand and unlocking my door. He was inside before anyone could speak, and I did my best to keep from chuckling at what – or rather whom – he was running away from. I helped Junie get her suitcase in the door, then mussed up her hair as I left for my own room, the sound of her cursing me out echoing around in my skull.

She slammed the door as soon as I was out, the wood smacking my ass as it was the only part of me that wasn't yet completely clear of the doorway. I yelped and jumped away from her door and rubbed my cheeks but stopped and moved my hands back to my own suitcase when I caught Enid looking suspiciously between me and Junie's door. I wasn't used to hiding our relationship so blatantly in front of my friends, but I

was going to have to get used to it if we were living right next door. At least the circumstances provided a cover for us.

I rolled my eyes, waving off her unspoken accusations and dragged both bags into my new room, only to stop in my tracks at what I saw.

My suitcase was knocked on its side as Hawthorne tipped over, landing awkwardly on the floor with limbs askew as his eyes rolled back into his head. He started convulsing, his arms and legs banging against the suitcase and the desk as he flopped around.

‘Shit,’ I swore, dropping down beside him to keep him from hurting himself. Enid followed suit, holding his legs down to stop them from kicking out. This was where we stopped sniping and were in complete agreement. When it came to Hawthorne and his fits there was no room for hostility, only keeping him safe.

‘Help me get him on the bed,’ I ordered, already sliding my arms beneath his and picking up his torso. It was tricky to manoeuvre him while he was still thrashing around, but we’d done this enough times to have it down pat. She picked up his legs and helped me situate him on my bed, the softness a safe place for him to have one of his visions.

He settled down after a bit, though he remained unconscious and would stay asleep until he’d recuperated, but once he was awake we were going to need to go to the dean with whatever he saw. I had no doubt it was about what had happened today and they could use all the help they could get right now to crack this mystery.

I settled in beside him, kicking up my feet and shooing Enid out of the room. She didn’t need to be here to watch him sleep like a creep, though she’d tried in the past. I knew she cared about him, but he only needed one of us nearby when he woke.

She left, albeit reluctantly and with demands that I call her as soon as he woke up. I agreed. I wasn't that heartless to keep her out of the loop. I may not have agreed with the sexual evolution of their friendship, nor her desire for more when he so clearly would never reciprocate those feelings, but we had been friends for a long time. The friendship between the two of them had started off strong, and I had been reluctant at first to let her into our small, two-person friendship circle. Eventually, she'd proved that she meant well when it came to Thorne, but I'd never been able to get passed her games. When she'd started flaunting herself in front of him, pushing up her breasts to grab his attention and wearing short skirts to tease him when she bent over, I gave up on a real friendship between us as well.

Now, she was just a nuisance I was quickly losing patience with.

The room descended into a peaceful quiet after she left, and I spent the time listening to the sound of my breaths in tandem with Thorne's. After a while, I could pick out a few rustling sounds from the other side of the wall of Junie putting her belongings away and settling in. It was nice to hear it, to audibly sense the closeness we now had physically as well as emotionally. Our sibling bond could only grow with the new proximity and the telepathic connection.

I was thinking up ways to trick people into giving away their newfound telepathic abilities when Hawthorne finally stirred, but when his brilliant blue eyes opened and clashed with mine I knew. Whatever he'd seen, it wasn't good.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 4:06 am

Juniper

I felt Oz's fear through the walls. It wasn't an immediate kind of fear, but more like that type that slowly builds as you overthink things. The anxious kind. It seemed that while the wall separating us prevented us from speaking telepathically, emotions trickled through instead.

I didn't go over to check on him since we were surrounded by other people and I could hear that Hawthorne was still around so I didn't text, either, but I wanted to. I tried to send soothing feelings through our new magical connection and hoped for the best.

I got a sense of gratitude and love in return, though the anxiety still lay below with enough force to start my own rising.

Unfortunately, there wasn't anything else I could do but be his silent support system for whatever was happening over there. I hoped Hawthorne was okay...

Once everything was packed away the best I could get it, I picked up the piece of paper detailing everything I needed to know regarding keeping the middle school campus safe and in line. From what I gathered, it was mostly about keeping some sort of structure so the kids don't freak out. Oz and I were basically babysitters and substitute teachers. We needed to make sure they ate their meals, kept their schedules, act as substitute teachers, and keep everyone distracted from what was happening outside. No one was to leave the building, so we were going to have to create some makeshift spaces for learning. Luckily, we had the means to do so. The cafeteria would just have to suffice.

Luckily, there had already been a quick assembly outlining all the new rules so that was one less thing for us to worry about.

I placed the instructions back on the desk, using a roll of tape I found in the drawer to stick it down so I wouldn't lose it. It was mostly a daily schedule to uphold. I was familiar with it from my own years at the middle school campus. It altered with each transition into the next school up, but it was pretty much the same across the academy. Obviously, the older we got the more responsibilities and freedoms we were afforded, but twelve to fourteen year olds were going to be rowdy enough as it was, let alone with a mystery to solve.

I was dreading going out there. I could already hear the excitable gossips trading theories about what was happening, and without any information flowing their way (or mine, for that matter) those theories were going to get out of hand. Oz and I were going to need to rally together to keep everyone from panicking, and that was going to be a task and a half with around five-hundred students to corral.

Sadly, with the clock on the wall ticking closer to lunch time, there was nothing else for it. I couldn't sit around twiddling my thumbs all day when there were things to be done.

I stood in front of the full-length mirror hanging from the wall beside the closet and smoothed out any wrinkles in my clothes and flyaway hairs. That was when I realised I still had on yesterday's makeup, smudged from sleep. With my hair still unbrushed and my face such a mess, I looked quite the state. No wonder Kendra accused me of having something to do with the madness when I embodied it myself.

When I stepped into the hallway Oz and Hawthorne were exiting the room beside me at the same time. I shot them a welcoming smile but the one Oz returned was a lot less enthusiastic and Hawthorne didn't even seem to see me. My twin looked tired, Hawthorne even more so, and I realised with a jolt that Hawthorne must have had a

vision. He kept it quiet, but I'd done some research when I was younger after learning about his power. There were a few different ways to receive a vision, but Hawthorne seemed to get the worst of it. Instead of dreams or precognition he was plagued with fits. The visions were more powerful, but there was always a balance when it came to magic. A give and a take. The stronger the magic, the larger the sacrifice needed to be. It was a fact that was drilled into us from an early age so we wouldn't abuse our powers.

Hawthorne gave me a tired nod as he stalked off. Oz stared after him, the lines between his brows deepening with his concern as he walked beside me.

‘He okay?’ I asked him.

‘He will be. The visions take a lot out of him.’

I hummed. ‘I bet. Anything noteworthy this time?’

‘He won't say,’ he admitted despondently, and then he changed the subject. ‘What's on the itinerary?’ he asked.

I narrowed my eyes at him. ‘You didn't check?’

He shrugged. ‘Had more important things to worry about. I figured you would've checked for the both of us.’

I sighed. ‘How did you know to come out, then?’

‘We heard you leaving.’

I huffed a quiet laugh. ‘You're ridiculous. It's lunchtime.’

‘Good,’ he grinned, his aura brightening at the prospect of food. ‘I’m starving.’

As if on cue, both of our stomachs growled loudly in agreement.

We shared a look that said we were going to need to get something in our systems before dealing with a horde of middle schoolers, so we picked up the pace to grab a quick snack before calling the others down for lunch. After chomping through a sandwich and an apple each, we headed over to the intercom system to start the lunch hour and were quickly swarmed by preteens eager for food.

Oz and I stayed on the outskirts, leaning against opposite walls as we watched over the students. There was, of course, lots of gossip about what was happening outside and why they were all on lockdown, but it was more excitable than worried. Youthful ignorance provided a sense of wonder whenever there was an unplanned change in routine, and I hoped they didn’t lose that too soon. Worrying was for the grown-ups, after all. At least, that’s what my mother always said.

We weren’t familiar with all the kids, but those that knew us stopped to say hello and ask questions to sate their curiosity. A few of the ones who didn’t know us plucked up enough courage to do the same, but most of them simply gawked at us as if we were the real spectacle here. Many of the girls approached Oz before being sent my way, their hair-twirling and eyelash batting a blatant display that had me holding in my laughter.

‘Maybe in ten years,’ I teased him when he found himself surrounded by a gaggle of giggling teeny boppers.

He glared at me through narrowed eyes, thoroughly unimpressed. All it did was add to my amusement and I shot him a wink.

‘Oh... gross!’ I heard a girl nearby exclaim in a stage whisper to her friends. ‘Miss

Olwyn and Mister Drudner are like, totally screwing. She just winked at him. Like, who does that?’

The speaker was a girl I’d had in my classes the previous semester. Harper James was the stereotypical ‘popular’ kid that everyone aspired to be or be friends with. It seemed so strange when I’d long since grown out of that phase. I no longer cared what others thought of me, and I’d long since stopped caring for fake friends. I was simply kind to everyone because I saw no need to be mean. Gossiping and tearing people down did nothing but cause harm to all parties involved, and I’d had to learn that lesson the hard way after being bullied for most of my youth. It had ended when I finally arrived at Aurora Academy. Surrounded by my own kind, I was eager to fit in and had been the ‘popular’ girl’s loyal follower. Oz had snapped me out of that phase pretty quick, thank the gods, especially when she’d turned her harsh words and cruel actions on him. I’d ditched her and never looked back, and I didn’t miss her at all once she’d graduated and didn’t bother to stay on for graduate degree. Good riddance.

Plus, killing with kindness was far more rewarding. My happiness and positivity seemed to piss people off when they were looking to get a rise out of me, so that’s what I kept doing. It was probably petty, but bullies were only bullies as long as they affected you, and I simply didn’t let them affect me.

Unfortunately for me, Oz was the complete opposite. I was never bothered by the harmless gossip, but it wasn’t the first time one of our students had made assumptions about our relationship and he was vehement about squashing any rumour that could come from it. I mean, I got that he was my brother and all but these guys didn’t know that. After a while it got a little insulting. I was totally a catch, dammit.

Thankfully, Oz didn’t hear it so I let it slide, hoping it would remain unnoticed.

Fortunately for us it was a Saturday so the kids didn’t have anywhere else to be. They

dispersed once the lunch hour was over to go their separate ways. Some went back to their rooms to either study or relax while others filed into the rec rooms to socialise. While most were good kids, the staff weren't naïve enough to believe all of them would follow the rules so a ward had been placed around the building to prevent any wannabe rebels from sneaking out. It allowed us to keep track of everyone when we needed to take a headcount at the end of the day.

Oz and I headed back to our own rooms where I showed him how to connect his phone to the dorm's security with a code that was provided on the list we'd been provided. It allowed us to keep an eye on the kids without hovering and gave us the opportunity to set up a study session between the two of us in Oz's room. He pulled out the Old Fae tomes and our research notes to continue deciphering the language.

I adjusted my position on the bed, uncrossing my legs to stretch them out before pulling the tome I was studying closer to me as I glanced between my notes and the pages. My brain was getting that fuzzy feeling it got when I was close to figuring something out, but I'd been sitting in the same position for so long my extremities were starting to go numb.

The swirling markings on the pages were a lot easier to pick out now that I knew what to look for. At first, studying the words was like looking at an endless picture. The start and end of each word, let alone each sentence was impossible to pick out, but that was one of the first things Oz and I had ever figured out about the strange language. Unfortunately, there were only so many ways you could write a swirl, so many of the words blended together into a jumble of scribbles that all looked the same. The differences were so slight that many who studied the dead language gave up before achieving any breakthroughs. They were practically impossible to find without a little magical assistance, and that was the first breakthrough we'd made only three years ago.

I squinted my eyes and adjusted the book so it was tilted at a slight angle away from

me, then let it lay flat again. There... could it be...?

‘Hey, Ozzie, come look at this. I think I found something.’

He was immediate at my side, leaning over my shoulder to see what I was looking at. I pointed towards a curve on the side of one word, the line slightly thicker than the rest.

‘Do you think it’s thicker or a dot that’s blended into the rest of the word thanks to the ink?’ I asked. Old Fae was never meant to be written in ink, the intricacies of the symbols too fine for something that bled so easily on the paper. It was yet another reason why Old Fae was such an impossible language to read.s

He squinted his eyes and leaned in for a closer look, then tilted the page just as I had a moment ago. His eyes lit up with excitement when he caught what I had, a grin lighting up his face.

‘That’s definitely a thicker curve. It looks like it’s just faded over time, which was probably why it was so hard to see. Good catch, Junie,’ he praised.

We isolated the words and copied it into our notes on a larger scale just as we had all the others we’d figured out, the bigger size allowing us to see all the details so easily missed in the smaller writing. We then consulted our previous research notes to decode the word itself.

‘Do you see the positioning of the thicker curve?’ he pointed it out. ‘How it’s connecting the five swirls?’

‘Huh. Yeah, I do.’

He grabbed the tome we’d copied the word from and scanned the page. ‘Look. Right

here,' he said eagerly, pointing to the word beside it. I hadn't noticed since it blended in with the surrounding markings, but it was a word we had already deciphered.

'Trials?' I read out the word, the dots not connecting inside my head.

'With the way the word is written, the connections as well as the rest of the sentence... I think it has something to do with combining something.'

I frowned. 'Combining what?'

He shrugged, unbothered with the fact that we didn't yet know enough to answer that question. 'Who knows? It's more than we had before, so I'm counting that as a win.'

He held his palm up for me to slap, a grin stretching wide across his cheeks and revealing both dimples usually hidden with his constant brooding. I loved it when he smiled, and I couldn't stop myself from returning the sentiment.

'Look at us, working together to make sense of our discoveries,' I beamed.

He froze, then turned to me with wide eyes. 'Junie, that's it! You're a genius!'

I blinked. 'Um... thank you?'

He let out a booming laugh, his joy bouncing around the small room. 'That's what the word means, Junie. Working together.'

I hummed thoughtfully. "Working together trials"? What does that even mean?

'Uniting, maybe?' he mused. 'Trials that unite something?'

'Five somethings.'

‘You’re right. Five things being tested to unite. I wonder what that’s about?’

‘I don’t know. My brain hurts. I need to take a break from being smart for a minute,’ I complained, massaging my temples as a thudding headache began to build.

‘Sure. You okay? Need me to heal you?’ he asked.

‘Nah, I just need some rest. Staring at swirls for hours on end usually ends in a headache eventually.’

‘All right. Why don’t you take a nap and I’ll keep things running for a bit,’ he offered.

I sent him a tired smile, exhaustion hitting me hard and fast at the prospect of sleep.

‘You sure?’

‘Positive.’

‘Okay. As long as you wake me if something happens or there’s any news,’ I bartered.

His eyes softened as he approached, wrapping me up in his long, muscular arms. ‘I promise.’

I rested my head against his chest and closed my eyes, enjoying the peaceful moment. A moment that was interrupted when the door swung open and Hawthorne stepped through with Enid on his heels.

Oz and I jumped apart like we’d been doing something wrong, though it was more to prevent a negative reaction from the curse.

‘What’s going on here?’ Enid shrieked, hands on her hips and a scowl scrunching up her face.

I winced, her shrill tone only succeeding in making my headache worse.

‘Middle school kids are stressful and I needed a hug,’ I blurted when I caught sight of the pain twisting Ozzie’s expression. Something was going on between them that I wasn’t privy to so I decided it was best to just cut my losses and get my head on a pillow sooner rather than later. The light was starting to hurt, too.

‘Let me just pack up my things,’ I said when I noticed the tomes still spread out on the bed. I gathered them up, stacking them in my arms and started towards the door.

Except I didn’t get very far. Hawthorne move in my direction the same time I headed for the door and we collided, the tomes flying from my arms into a messy pile on the floor. I winces when I noticed how many pages were now bent. Creases in the pages were going to make decoding the symbols even more difficult now.

‘Shit, I’m sorry,’ Hawthorne said, immediately bending down to pick up the books only I did the same and our foreheads collided with an audible thud. The pain of the impact worked with the growing headache to knock my on my ass, and I swore I saw stars.

‘Fuck, shit, I’m so sorry...’ he kept cursing. When I opened my eyes it was to the view of him backing away, hands raised in the air as if he was afraid to come near me again.

I didn’t blame him. Honestly, I was thankful for it. He may have been hot as hell and the star of my many wet dreams, but I didn’t think I could handle another blow. To my head or to my pride.

‘Ow...’ I complained, rubbing my head where we’d connected.

The pounding against my skull ratcheted up to a level I struggled to handle and I felt myself sway. I heard their voices as they spoke, but I could no longer pick out the words and their meanings, instead the sounds jumbling together to worsen the migraine. My eyeballs aches, my ears rang, and I couldn’t take it any longer.

When the darkness caved in around the edges of my vision I didn’t have a choice but to let the darkness consume me.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 4:06 am

Hawthorne

‘O h, shit,’ I exclaimed breathlessly, then hurried to bend down both to help her gather her books and to hide the growing burn inside my cheeks. ‘I’m so sorry.’

I couldn’t look at her as I lowered myself to stack the books that fell, intending to use them to cover my undoubtedly fire-engine red face. Instead, I ended up only doing more damage when our foreheads clashed as she bent at the same time.

I backed up again, mortification riding my fight or flight instincts and leaning firmly towards flight.

‘Fuck. Shit, I’m so sorry,’ I rambled, my head still swimming with confusion and hurt at what I’d just walked in on. Compounding with the headache and humiliation from my clumsiness, I didn’t know what to do with my body except get it out of the way.

‘Ow...’ she complained, her hand cradling her head. I felt even worse when I remembered her telling us she already had a headache before I’d gone and made it worse. Gods, I was fucking this up. Big time.

Suddenly, her face paled and she swayed, her eyes rolling back in her head as she dropped to the floor.

‘Shit!’ I exclaimed, rushing forward to catch her before she could hurt herself in the fall.

‘What the fuck did you do, Thorne?’ Oz asked, concern riding his instincts hard in a

way I only saw from him when he cared about someone. Just how close were they?

Now wasn't the time to think about that, however, when the woman that had plagued me for years was unconscious in my arms.

'I...I don't...' I stammered, unsure what there even was to say.

He huffed, moving to push the door open further. 'Just help me get her back to her room,' he ordered. I didn't argue.

'Enid, can you grab the books?' I asked, only Oz stepped forward to snatch them up before she could even graze one with a fingertip.

'I've got the books. Just get her settled in her own bed. The door should still be open.'

'Why can't I grab the books?' she asked with a scowl, and I couldn't fault her for her suspicions.

'Because you couldn't carry them when they were in my suitcase and I don't trust you not to ruin them even more than they've already been,' he retorted, but I'd had enough. Juniper was limp in my arms. She was the priority here.

'Who cares who gets the books. Someone get the damn doors so I get her into her own room already,' I snapped.

'Right,' Oz muttered, gathering the old, strange looking leather tomes from the floor and following on my heels while Enid opened the door to Juniper's dorm.

As soon as the door was open, I barged in and placed Juniper's unconscious form on top of her bed, arranging her into a more comfortable position so she wouldn't wake

with numb limbs. However, as I was gazing down at her the scene seemed wrong. Praying for forgiveness for what I was about to do, I pulled off her shoes and averted my eyes as I began tugging off her jeans.

‘Woah, what are you doing, man?’ Oz stepped in before I could get them over her hips.

‘She should be under the covers, but sleeping in jeans is uncomfortable...’ I trailed off, realising how insane I sounded. Juniper didn’t even really know me, and I certainly didn’t have any right to be undressing her when she couldn’t even consent.

‘Why don’t you just head on out and I’ll meet up with you later?’ he asked, ushering me and Enid towards the door. ‘I’ll watch over her, see if I can heal her. She really was complaining about a headache.’

He turned his back on us, the discussion apparently over whether we liked it or not. There wasn’t really anything Enid or I could say, either. We had no place here, and she did know Oz a bit better since they both taught at the middle school. My eyes caught on the leather tomes stacked neatly on her desk. And apparently studied together.

My mortification came back full force with the added pain of the strange new closeness between my best friend and the unwitting bane of my existence. I was so embarrassed that the amount of blood rushing to my head made me light-headed. Before I could stop myself, I swayed. Luckily, I managed to catch myself before I joined Juniper in her unconsciousness.

‘Woah!’ Enid leaped toward me and placed her hand on my arm to help keep me upright, though her touch did nothing to truly help.

I muttered a quick incantation beneath my breath to reset my heartrate back to normal

and remove the flush practically singeing my hair and prayed to all that the gods that it had gone unnoticed. Of course I wasn't that lucky.

'Hey, are you okay?' she asked, and I realised her hands were still on my arms.

'Y-yeah,' I stammered, hesitated, and then fled the scene like the hounds of hell were on my heels.

I ran across campus towards the university dorms, bolted up the stairs to my apartment, and I slammed the door shut behind me in record time. As a grad student I had a private studio apartment to myself, and I was more than happy for that right now. Despite the humiliation of bowling over Juniper and essentially knocking her out, something magical had just happened. Something I should have been ashamed of but couldn't bring myself to feel anything other than the butterflies swarming my stomach.

I'd held her in my arms.

My dick was hard as steel.

My bag slid off my shoulder and down my arm to rest at my feet, and I left it where it fell as I headed straight for the bathroom. I turned the shower on, the water magically heating to my preferred temperature within seconds. I shucked my clothes and tossed them aside, uncaring where they ended up, and climbed into the stall. The water was bliss on my bare skin, and my hands followed the way it tracked over me from my chest, over my stomach, to finally drag over my aching cock.

It was throbbing, the sensitive tip already seeping precum that I used my thumb to massage in my head.

Just as I gripped the base, readying to stroke myself to completion, the shower door

swung open. I jolted, startled, but it was only Enid. She took one look at the state of me and tutted but shucked her own clothes to join me. I watched her as her breasts swayed with her movements, tracking the path of her dark nipples as she stepped inside the shower stall.

As soon as the fogged-up glass door sealed shut behind her, her hand was wrapped around my cock while the other stroked further below, cupping my balls and rolling them between her fingers. I couldn't contain the moan that escaped, the sound low and gravelly as I allowed her to toy with me for a moment. I closed my eyes and imagined it was Juniper's hands on me instead of my friend's, but it was more difficult now that I knew how they felt on me.

Juniper's hands were much smaller than Enid's, and they were a little rougher than I imagined they'd have been. The calluses on her fingers that I'd felt when I'd arranged her on her bed, most likely from the amount of time she spent in the gardens, only added another layer to those fantasies. It was even more erotic to imagine them sliding against me, the juxtaposition of the soft and the rough only adding to the pleasure.

Enid's hands tightened on me to the point of pain, drawing out a little whimper from the back of my throat. I loved the combination of pleasure and pain, bringing myself to the edge of my limits and leaving myself aching in all the best ways. But I just couldn't get there with Enid's silky soft hands. Whereas before they had been just hands I'd had no problem smoothing against my skin, now they were disrupting the fantasy.

I wrapped my fingers around her wrists to halt her movements, but I still needed a release. Pushing her out of the shower stall, I picked her up and settled her on the countertop. Her hair stuck to the mirror behind her and she hissed as she made contact with the cold surface, but one look at the wildness behind my eyes and her own drooped with heavy-lidded lust.

She grabbed for me, but I didn't let her. She wasn't the woman I wanted beneath me, and I felt the urgent need to punish her for it. Smacking her hands away, I transferred them to my grip and yanked them high up over her head, stretching her body and opening her up for me to take. Her breasts pushed out at the new angle, the dark nipples erect and begging to be abused, so I bowed my head, gripped one between my teeth and bit down. Hard.

She cried out, the sound more pained than pleased, but I didn't let up. Nipple still caught between my teeth, I nudged her legs open with my own and settled between them, my cock already seeking her hot entrance. I pushed in with one hard thrust, all the way to the base, enjoying the way she squirmed beneath me and whimpered at the sudden invasion.

Enid was always wet for me, and it didn't take her long to adjust to my thickness, and I started pounding into her as soon as she did. Flesh slapped against flesh, combining with the slick sounds of our fucking. Grunts tore from my throat as I pushed into her roughly, my grip around on her wrists tightening as I moved my other hand to squeeze her pretty little throat.

Her mouth gaped as she attempted to draw in a breath to no avail, and I thrust even harder inside her. I wanted her to hurt. I wanted her to suffer for being the wrong woman.

Her walls started to flutter around my length, the danger I posed driving her to heights no other man had managed to achieve. I would know. She told me all about them.

Within moments she was squeezing me like a vice, her scream nothing but a whistle through my grip around her throat. spurts of liquid squirted from her, soaking me in another shower I would need to wash off before getting into bed. The thought of smelling like her removed me from the moment and I struggled to keep going. I just

wanted to pull out and be done with it, but she deserved more than that from me.

I kept thrusting, drawing out her pleasure until she was a loose weight against the mirror. Only then did I release her, sliding myself from her slick heat. I was still hard, my orgasm nowhere near close. I could keep going, but she just wasn't doing it for me tonight. I didn't think she would ever really be what I needed. She wasn't Juniper, and that was a problem.

Enid stirred, sitting up with a sated smile on her face that soon dropped when she realised I hadn't come with her. Her lips were quick to reform into a sly smile, eager for more when I stepped away to put some distance between us.

'Not tonight,' I said, then picked up her clothes and handed them to her before returning to the shower.

'You need to get over her,' she said, her voice tinged with frustration and no small amount of concern. When we'd first started sleeping together it had been a lot easier to look past the fact that there was no romantic love between us. Lately, however, it was getting increasingly difficult to find any sort of pleasure in any woman, not just Enid. I would have worried about the state of our friendship, except she knew the score. No strings and our friendship remained intact.

'Easier said than done,' I mumbled, hoping she couldn't hear me over the stream of water baring down on me.

I wasn't so lucky.

'This isn't healthy, Thorne. I'm worried about you. You need help.'

Help wasn't what I needed. I needed her .

There was no time to dwell on it, however, because the distinct tingling that overcame my entire body let me know I needed to hurry it up and make it to the safety of my soft mattress before I collapsed. Another vision was coming, the second one today. Even if my previous vision was like a personal attack that had rubbed salt in an open, seeping wound, the amount of visions in one day was enough to let me know that something big was happening.

But one thing was abundantly clear as my second vision was much like my first. My stomach twisted with nausea as I was forced to watch the woman who held my heart and didn't even know it have sex with someone else. Again. It was strange, as the first vision showed her partner to have purple skin and curling horns. A Daemon, which was insane since they didn't even exist. This new one showed her with another man with dark skin that shifted to onyx scales beneath her touch.

While I was cursing the fates for plaguing me with these visions, taunting me with the knowledge that she would literally rather be with men who didn't even exist than realise that I'd been right in front of her nose this entire time, I understood at least one aspect of the message they were sending me. Something big was happening and Juniper was somehow at the centre of it all. The content of my visions had dread curling in my gut, because while they were ambiguous in their context, I had a feeling Juniper was going to need a protector, and I intended to take the job.

No one was going to touch her. I'd make sure of it.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 4:06 am

Juniper

Drumming.

That was the only way I knew to describe what I was hearing. It wasn't like drums, exactly, but more like my pulse pounding in my ears, but more musical. A steady beat but with a different, more intricate rhythm.

I could sense it was magical in its essence, calling to me like a siren's song with the sole purpose of nudging me towards my fate. I knew that if I followed it I would receive the answers everyone sought, but my common sense told me not to. It could have been a trap, or worse.

And yet, even with that knowledge, it persisted, uncaring that I was aware of its intent.

It was a powerful enough force that I found my body moving of its own accord despite my desire to stay exactly where I was, comfortable in my bed wrapped up warm and cosy in my covers.

As soon as my bare feet hit the carpeted floor, however, the drumming stopped.

I shook my head, physically attempting to shake loose any dregs of magic that dared to remain, the rest of my sleepiness going with it.

That was weird...

With my newfound consciousness I found the earlier events were coming back to me. The headache; Hawthorne and Enid walking in on me and Oz hugging; passing out after bashing heads with Hawthorne. Gods, I was such a klutz sometimes. It was no wonder he never noticed me unless I was directly under his nose.

‘Junie?’ Oz’s voice called from the foot of the bed.

‘Oz? What are you doing in here?’ I asked, my voice scratchy from sleep.

‘Making sure you were okay. I tried to heal you, but there wasn’t actually anything wrong. At least that my magic could detect...’

‘Which means it was a magical attack,’ I surmised.

‘It seems that way, yes. How are you feeling?’

I took stock of my head and the rest of my body, finding nothing out of the ordinary. Beside the drumming. Perhaps I should have mentioned that.

‘I’m fine, but something woke me up, but then it went away,’ I admitted.

His brows furrowed, then he moved to sit closer to me as he stared intensely into my eyes. ‘What was it?’

‘Drumming. Sort of. I’m not really sure, but it was like it was calling to me.’

‘I didn’t hear anything,’ he said, his scowl deepening.

I lifted my shoulders in a shrug, letting it go. ‘It’s gone now. No point worrying. I think I’ll head to my garden for a bit, though. Clear my head. It still feels a little fuzzy.’

‘Oh. Sure.’

I scanned the room, noting the tomes stacked neatly on my desk and remembered Hawthorne and Oz. ‘Hey, is Hawthorne okay? That bump was...’ I trailed off, embarrassment heating my cheeks and I couldn’t look at him.

‘They left after they helped me move you in here. Thorne started to undress you to make you more comfortable, but don’t worry, I stopped him before he could pull of your pants.’

My eyes widened until they stung. ‘What?’

He sniggered, the sound more like a pig snorting than a human being and I shoved at his chest. He fell back, not expecting the attack and laughed harder. ‘I don’t know if I’m more mad that he tried to undress me while I was asleep, I missed it, or you stopped it,’ I pouted.

‘Whatever. I’m heading out.’

It was that moment that I noticed that the darkness in the room wasn’t due to the curtains being closed since they were still open, but it was nighttime. ‘Hey, what time is it?’

He glanced at the watch on his wrist. ‘A little after one in the morning. Why?’

‘I was out for a few hours then. I missed dinner. Did everything go okay?’

‘Everything was fine. Prof. Sweeney came back so she stood in for you. I told her what happened just in case it had anything to do with what’s going on out there, so she was happy to let you rest.’

‘Oh. Well, thanks, I guess. I’m sorry I wasn’t there, though.’

‘Don’t worry about it. It was better actually. No one gossiped about me and Sweeney trying to get it on,’ he grimaced and I wrinkled my nose.

‘I didn’t realise you heard that.’

‘Unfortunately, I heard it all. I can’t wait to break this curse so people stop assuming we’re fucking just ‘cause we’re seen together.’

‘Truth.’

He studied the wall when I pulled on some fresh pants and a sweater, giving me some privacy. He turned back when I put my tennis shoes back on, then stood with me as I walked to the door.

As I was locking up he stopped me with a hand on my arm. I looked up at him, curious for what he wanted to say. He seemed to be hesitating, and eventually his shoulders slumped and he sent me a crooked smile.

‘Just be careful out there, okay?’

I grinned at him. ‘Don’t worry. I will be.’

‘And don’t stay out too late. We have breakfast duty in the morning.’

I gave him a two-fingered salute. ‘Don’t worry, I’ll be in bed again soon. Promise.’

We gave each other a quick side hug where he pressed a brotherly kiss to the top of my head, then we separated. Him to his room and me down the stairs. I didn’t want to take the elevator because it made too much noise and might have clued in the kids

that I was leaving, instead choosing the barely used stairwell at the back of the building.

Stepping through the ward felt like stepping through an electrical field, the magic crackling over my skin and making my hairs stand on end. I quickly smoothed down the hair on top of my head just in case I ran into anyone, though I doubted I would. It was too late for anyone to be out and about right now, unless I bumped into a faculty member doing the rounds to keep the academy safe.

It took me no time at all to wind my way through the pathways towards the forest. My personal garden that I'd cultivated here since I'd started at Aurora Academy twelve years ago resided just beyond the treeline, hidden away from prying eyes and protected by my magic so only I could enter. Luckily, it was inside the section of the forest that hadn't been squashed by the black behemoth, and I counted my blessings for that.

I easily found the concealed entrance, an archway made of roses that, to anyone else, just looked like a bush between two trees. I could feel the call of my magic, a beckoning warmth that was eager to welcome me and I smiled in response. However, when I lifted my foot to step through, my fingers grazing the delicate, velvety rose petals, a snap sounded close by like someone had stepped on a twig.

I paused, my ears alert as I listened for any sign of danger. There was wildlife that called this forest home, and not all of them were small like the squirrels, mice and rabbits. These trees were also home to larger predators, such as wolves, bears, and even a cougar or two. It had been drilled into us since we'd first begun at Aurora Academy that the forest was dangerous and to enter with caution.

I didn't see anything when I peered between the trees, nor did I hear anything else. The sounds of the forest's nightlife still drifted to me, so I doubted there were any larger predators lurking about looking for their next meal. Regardless, I decided it

was best to get into the safety of my garden. Just in case.

Except my instincts were screaming that something was off.

I glanced to my right where I felt the eyes watching me only to see another pair glinting silver in the darkness as they peered from behind the foliage, too high to be an animal stalking its prey. The more I stared, the more I could see the shadow of a person's frame. They were large, bulky, and worryingly good at concealing themselves in the surrounding nature.

Slowly, the figure stepped forward into a beam of moonlight shining through the canopy, letting me see them more clearly. He was tall, perhaps twice my height with long, white hair pulled back away from his face in a series of small, intricate braids that revealed ears that ended in sharp tips, a single silver hoop dangling through each tip.

Holy fuck... he was a Fae.

His silvery eyes practically glowed in the moonlight, highlighting a chiselled jaw ended in a pointed chin that directed me down to the rest of his body. It was muscular, a warrior's build, clad in dark leathers that did more to reveal the cover up.

My eyes trailed down his well-kept physique until I landed on the deep V of his hips, teasing me with what lay beneath tight-fitting leather pants.

I gasped when I felt the cold, sharp edge of a blade against my throat, threatening to slice through my neck if I made one wrong move.

The man in front of me had been a distraction while his friend had come up from behind. But damn, what a distraction he made.

‘Who are you?’ I asked, my voice breathless in a way it had only ever been when I was lost in a haze of lust. To be fair, my libido was definitely screaming at me to jump him. I didn’t even want to see who was holding the knife to my throat, because I was concerned he would be even more attractive.

Also, was it sick of me that I kind of liked it?

The white-haired Fae tilted his head to the side as he studied me right back, his eyes brightening even more as if he was using magic to search me. It wasn’t X-ray vision, was it? I didn’t think I’d be as mad as I was supposed to be if that were the case. His friend could hold me captive while he checked me out any day.

No. Stop it. Bad vagina.

‘Hoo... ah... yoo...’ the Fae repeated my words, testing them on his tongue, his voice a deep, lyrical bass that sent shivers scattering across my skin like tiny little erotic explosions. His accent was also delicious as it washed over me, but I supposed it was silly of me to assume he spoke English. He wasn’t even from the same realm.

Oh... shit.

No fucking way.

Deciding to take a risk, especially considering the blade against my neck was definitely real and not actually placed there with my apparently newfound kink in mind, I raised my hand to place it against my chest, keeping my movements slow so as not to spook them.

‘My name is Juniper,’ I said, tapping my chest. ‘Juniper.’

‘Joo... Ni... Purr...’

I beamed at him, probably looking like a complete psycho in my current position, but I couldn't bring myself to care. There was something seriously wrong with me...

'Right! I'm Juniper. What's your name?'

He looked behind me with a single eyebrow raised as I assumed he shared a silent conversation with the person attached to the blade. When his gaze moved back to me, the intensity caused my core to clench, a gush of warmth leaking from me as every atom in my body lusted for him.

I wondered then if this reaction was a magical side-effect of some sort because I had never responded like this to anyone, let alone a stranger of myth. Besides Hawthorne, of course, but that was different. My attraction to him had been instant, but it had also evolved as we'd grown older. This was instantaneous and highly suspicious.

I narrowed my eyes at him, about to call him out on it but then he spoke again.

'Evander,' he said, patting his chest.

I blinked, then my earlier reservations dissipated into thin air and I grinned again. 'Evander. It's nice to meet you.'

I stuck my thumb out and jabbed it towards the guy still holding me hostage. 'And him?'

Evander's lips twitched as if he were fighting a smile. 'Arden.'

'Well, Arden. Would you mind removing the stabby thing, please?' I asked in my sweetest tone while I gestured toward me neck.

Evander said something to his friend in his own language, so I didn't understand what

he was saying until the blade was lowered and I was free to step away from the danger. I turned so my back was to the entrance of my garden, already knowing they wouldn't be able to follow if I needed to make a quick escape and took stock of this Arden fellow.

He was shorter and leaner than Evander with hair worn the same way only a shade darker. His ears were also a little longer and devoid of any adornment. His features were also a lot more delicate, rounder, almost as if he were a woman though his build was undeniably male. Honestly, Evander still held the title for sexiest man alive. No competition.

None of us spoke, the silence between us building as we studied one another with a curiosity that bordered on obsession. At least on my end. They were Fae , for fuck's sake. A race of supernatural beings that were believed to have gone extinct a long time ago if they'd ever even existed. Well, clearly they did, but that didn't change the fact that they weren't supposed to be real.

With the way they were looking at me, I wondered if they thought the same of Humans. Were we merely myths and legends to them as they were to us? I giggled. How odd.

Suddenly, I stiffened. The drumming was back. It was subtle at first, a quiet thumping in the back of my head that I ignored until I couldn't anymore. It crescendoed until it was all I could focus on, all I could hear. My head twisted as I attempted to gauge which direction it was coming from, and I almost missed the way the Fae men did the same. Could they hear it, too?

'The drumming,' I all but whispered, my voice lost beneath the sound.

And then we were moving, their bodies in sync with mine as the magic took hold and we were pulled towards the sound. It seemed none of us were strong enough to fight

it's grip, and I wasn't sure I even wanted to. It wasn't a feeling of safety, but more like a necessity. I needed to be wherever it was leading me, I felt it in my bones.

I lost track of the Fae, my instincts telling me that they weren't important right now and they posed no threat. I didn't think that would last forever, but for now they weren't something to worry about.

The drumming got louder, faster, more intense as I got closer to the source. I stepped out into the middle of the courtyard I'd stood in yesterday morning, the one where we'd all gawped at the structure with the strange, Fae-like markings. I could see it now, though it was just a vague black mass obstructing my vision beyond what I really needed to be looking at. In fact, it brought it into better clarity.

A shimmer in mid-air, like a heatwave on a blisteringly hot summer's day, only iridescent and fixed in place. It started off small, just a spec floating above the ground, but then widened and stretched into something so large it could probably fit a bus.

I'd never seen one before, but I knew what it was. A portal. And it wanted me to step through.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 4:07 am

Phenex

There was a commotion outside my door. Thundering footsteps, raised voices, each one trying to be heard over the others. The energy was frantic and brimming with intrigue.

Something had happened.

The assembly earlier had been uninformative at best and pointless at worst. We had essentially been told to stay in our rooms, keep our noses out of it, and let the ‘grown ups’ get the job done. We weren’t even told what that job was, and it was incredibly condescending how they spoke to us as if we weren’t adults in our own right. I ignored it for the most part. The bastards in charge were typically from the House of Pride so I didn’t take their words or actions to heart. They always enjoyed blowing hot air up their own asses to inflate their own egos.

That was one of the reasons I loved my own House so much. We may have been Greed and that came with its own stigmas, but at least we were honest about our predilections and didn’t treat the other Houses as if they were beneath us. Well, there would always be someone and I had my own opinions, but I didn’t strut around like a puffed up prick constantly spewing shit. I cultivated my hoard and minded my own business.

But that didn’t mean I wasn’t curious why everyone was in such a tizzy.

I placed a dried flower inside my book to mark my page before closing it and delicately replacing on the ledge beside my bed. Then I quickly threw on a shirt,

untangling myself when it got caught on my horns before tugging it down to cover my bare torso, pulled on some pants, then I cracked open my door to peer out into the hallway.

Students were gathered in groups that mingled as they excitedly discussed something I couldn't quite catch with the overload of sensory information. Too many voices were speaking to pick out any words, and I winced at the noise.

That was when Abaddon pushed through the crowd as he headed straight for me. He pushed me back inside my room and slammed the door behind him when the others caught sight of him and started bombarding him with questions. He ran a nervous hand through his hair and stroked down to the tip of his right horn.

'What's going on?' I asked.

'We looked outside,' was his vague answer. I waited for him to elaborate, but when he didn't I pushed for more.

'What's outside, Don? What did you see?'

He pursed his lips and blew out a long, slow breath. His hesitancy was started to worry me.

'We are in a completely new realm.'

'Yes, you've mentioned that,' I told him, annoyed at his hedging. 'Just tell me, Don. What's going on?'

He chewed his lip as if debating he even wanted to tell me, then he physically deflated and gestured toward my bed. 'You might want to sit down for this.'

I scowled at him, losing my patience and ignoring his advice. ‘Just spit it out already, Abaddon. The suspense is making it worse, and you’re making me anxious.’

‘All right, all right. I’m not even really sure what to say. There have been some confessions of a strange sound, but only a few are hearing it. Enough to know that there’s something going on that’s beyond our control.’

‘What kind of music? What does it do? How does this connect to being transported to a different realm?’ I asked in rapid succession and he raised his hands to stop the bombardment.

‘Let me finish and you’ll know what I know,’ he shot me a pointed look and I took the hint, sucking my lips into my mouth to keep them closed.

‘Right. Well, when the first student came forth saying they could hear something, they said it felt like they were being summoned. At first we dismissed it, but then Mistress Bast said she could hear it, too. She also felt the call. When more and more came forward claiming to hear it, to feel a pull tugging them outside, we decided to take a look.’

He paused, taking a breath to steady himself and I was practically vibrating with the need to push him to spill it already.

‘There’s a courtyard separating the academy with a village of red brick buildings. Buildings that seem to belong to... Humans.’

My breath stalled in my lungs. ‘What?’

‘And that’s not all. We caught a few of them scouting and guarding the perimeter, but we also found they weren’t the only ones. There was a Fae sighting, and a Shifter, too. Someone even claimed to see winged beings soaring in the skies above.’

‘Angels?’ I all but squeaked. If that were true and the stories about their race were more than just cautionary tales, then our greatest enemy had returned. We were all in danger.

‘I’m not finished,’ he said grimly.

‘What else?’ I asked breathlessly.

‘The courtyard gave way to a portal. All the races seem to be drawn to it, including ours. We believe that is where the call is coming from, and we’ve lost those who could hear it already.’

‘They stepped through?’ I surmised, my knees wobbling with the overload of information. I finally took Abaddon’s advice and sat down on my bed, my legs suddenly unable to hold my weight.

‘Not yet,’ he admitted, his tone fierce and determined.

I jerked my chin towards the door where the students were still milling around noisily. ‘That’s what’s got them so worked up, huh.’ It wasn’t a question.

‘A group of us are preparing to head outside. We need to stop them from stepping through that portal.’

I jumped to my feet, the decision needing no thought. ‘I’m coming with you.’

‘You should stay here where it’s safe. The other... beings seem just as freaked out as us and we don’t know how hostile they’ll be.’

I shook my head, strapping my belt around my waist to keep my pants up. ‘I’m coming.’

Abaddon sighed but didn't bother arguing any further. We both knew there would be no talking me out of it. He chuckled my boots at me when he saw me hunting for them, then waited by the door. Once I strapped on my last dagger, securing the sheaths firmly to my belt, we exited the room. My brother held the swarm of curious Daemons away while I locked up, ensuring my ward was in place. I wouldn't put it past any one of them to sneak in and snoop or steal something. That was just the way of Greed.

'Abaddon, are you going to save them?' one person called.

'Are there really other races?' another asked.

'I heard there was an Angel!' someone further back shouted above the rest, prompting another slew of chaos.

'Move aside!' my brother commanded, and thankfully, though they didn't move far, they did move enough for us to squeeze through. 'Back to your rooms!'

With much grumbling they did as they were told, though a few stuck around for a little longer to watch us head towards the stairwell.

When we reached the Academy's main exit, a crowd of older students, professors and Masters had already accumulated. They brightened with anticipation when they saw us approach, a couple of them shooting me furtive looks but no one said anything. I wasn't exactly well known for my sociability or my skill as a soldier, but that didn't mean I wasn't capable. They simply hadn't seen that side of me, used to Abaddon's quietly studious younger brother.

'Right, that's all of us, then,' Master Gulliver of Gluttony, the academy's headmaster confirmed after a quick scan of those of us that had gathered. 'The plan is simple. Keep our people safe from both the portal and any other threats. We do not know if

the other creatures are friendly or hostile, so proceed with caution. Now, let's go save our people.'

He waved a hand in front of the wall which disappeared to reveal the outside world.

A strange new world with green grass, odd buildings, and an array of strange looking supernatural races currently circling a growing portal. There was no rhyme or reason for the pattern in which they stood, unintentionally intermingling while they stared catatonically at the portal.

Master Gulliver strode forward, eyeing our surroundings warily as the other beings were also out and running around with a frantic energy that bordered on hysterical. A few fights had broken out between what looked like a Human and a Fae, but the majority were ignoring the other races in favour of trying to wake up their friends.

We clustered around Master Gulliver knowing there was safety in numbers and watched each other's backs as we headed for the circle of enraptured beings.

'Spread out,' he commanded. 'Wake them up. Do whatever is necessary so we can get back behind the safety of the academy's walls.'

I didn't think it was the smartest idea to split up, especially when there were so many potential threats wandering freely, but we split off into pairs. Abaddon and I stuck together and headed for the other side of the circle. I couldn't help studying the beings we'd previously believed to be creatures of mythology, mere stories told by creative minds. My focus was repeatedly drawn back to those I recognised to be Humans, a giddiness building inside me at the prospect of finding the woman of my dreams. Was she here? If so, I hoped she wasn't one of the...

Fuck me.

There she was. Dark green hair, tiny, delicate build, milky smooth skin, pink pouty lips, and those brilliant blue eyes...

‘Don,’ I called out, but my voice was barely more than a whisper. It was like the air was constricting in my lungs, refusing to budge.

‘What is it?’ he asked, but he didn’t look up from where he was trying to jolt a Daemon I didn’t recognise back to reality.

‘It’s her.’

‘Her?’ he asked, still not fully paying attention as he gripped the unresponsive Daemon’s shoulders and shook.

‘The Human woman from my dreams.’

That caught his attention. He paused with his hands still on the other Daemon and his head slowly turned in our direction. His eyes landed on me first, gauging my reaction before following my gaze to the woman in front of me. His breath stalled in his lungs as he took her in, cataloguing the physical features I’d raved about. I watched it all in my periphery, refusing to remove my attention from the literal woman of my dreams.

Unfortunately, she was just as responsible as the rest of the circle caught up in the call of the portal.

Abandoning my quest to protect our people, my sole goal now was to protect her. My instincts screamed at me that she was my mate, her sweet, floral and earthy scent drifting beneath my nose tauntingly.

I lifted my hand to touch her but I didn’t get far, terrified I was hallucinating.

‘It’s really her?’ I heard Abaddon ask from beside me, though when he’d moved I didn’t know.

‘Is she real?’ I breathed.

Don’s poked her shoulder with his forefinger. She swayed slightly from the pressure but quickly straightened, the action proving her tangibility but also how out of it she was. There was no reaction.

Our names were called from somewhere across the way but I ignored it. Abaddon started cursing up a storm, gripping my arm in a vice-like grip as if afraid I was about to be forcefully taken from him.

Just as I was plucking up enough courage to stroke my fingers over her cheek, Abaddon was suddenly between us, blocking my way. I snarled, annoyed at the obstacle he was making of himself, but he snarled right back. Only it wasn’t directed at me.

‘Don’t touch him,’ he ground out and I blinked away the fog of finding my mate to take in my surroundings. A small group of battered and bleeding Humans were encircling my mate, tucking her safely inside the gap between their bodies to keep me from her. I didn’t like that. At all.

The Humans guarding her were all larger, even the female, and I wondered if that was normal. Was her height an abnormality among her people, or were these ones just giants? I cast those thoughts aside when I took in their fierce expressions. These Humans cared about my mate, which was the only reason I felt comfortable enough to back down, though I didn’t dare back away. I didn’t want to hurt her friends trying to keep her safe, but I wasn’t abandoning her, either. At least we had a common goal there.

The large male in the front spat angry words at me and Don in a strange round language that flowed smoothly from his lips with little pauses here and there as he used his teeth, tongue and throat, and I noticed his eyes were the same brilliant shade of blue as my mate's. His features were definitely more masculine with a squarer jawline that was bruising and a more prominent brow ridge currently bleeding from a cut, but the thin, slightly upturned shape of his nose also reminded me of hers. His hair was a yellowish shade rather than green, but there was a clear familial connection between the two. I wondered just what their relationship was. Was he a brother? A cousin? I couldn't tell from looks alone.

Abaddon nudged me with his elbow, snapping me out of my thoughts. I let them drift away to focus on the present and peered around the yellow-haired man to get another look at her. Don nudged me again and I turned my head slightly to look at him only to find him glaring.

‘Get your head on straight, Phenex. This is not the time for daydreaming.’

I cleared my throat, hoping whatever was blocking my sense left with it. ‘Right. Sorry.’

I tore my attention from my mate and the Humans surrounding her to take in the scene unfolding before me. The different races were attempting to carve out small sections of territory around their catatonic friends to keep the other races at bay. Many had already come to blows, mostly with Daemons. From first glance I could see why. Our physical appearance would have been daunting to those without horns, wings, or barbed tails. The Fae seemed to be the most aggressive while the Humans were merely defensive. Large, beastly creatures that looked like oversized Humans I was able to determine were Shifters when I watched as a few of them shapeshifted into their animal counterparts. Large, four-legged creatures with shaggy fur covering the entirety of their bodies to long, scaled things with zero appendages that seemed to move by undulating their bodies, and even small, winged things with taloned feet and

protruding beaks, their bodies encompassed in an array of colourful feathers. Each of them had natural weapons in their second forms that rallied against the metal weapons of the Fae.

Blades sliced, whistling through the air, claws and fangs tore through flesh, blood splattered on the grass, the crimson colour contrasting starkly against vivid green. My hands went to rest on the daggers at my waist as I readied for an attack. I didn't want to draw them yet in case my actions were misinterpreted as an offensive threat.

A wave of power burst from the centre of the courtyard where the portal pulsed with magic. It tore through me, almost knocking me to the ground but I forced my feet to remain planted firmly in the short, green blades of grass. It hadn't hurt, but it hadn't been pleasant sensation, either. Like small insects crawling beneath my skin. A tickle more than anything.

'Abaddon, what is happening?' I asked as I took up a fighting position with his back against mine.

'I do not know, little brother,' he replied in a strained voice.

'Juniper!' I heard one of the Humans surrounding my mate call. The other male, this one with darker, earth-coloured hair and multicoloured eyes also in earthy tones. I wondered what he was saying, but there wasn't any time to guess as the ones caught up in the portal's magic suddenly lurched forward towards the centre. The Humans surrounding my green-haired beauty scrambled to hold onto her, but whatever magic that gripped her had too strong of a hold. She took a step forward, and another, and then another, all the while her guardians tried and failed to hold her back.

All around us groups attempted to halt the magically possessed people to no avail. Closer and closer they walked to the portal as if the rest of us didn't even exist, and I fell in line with the Humans and joined their attempts. Abaddon moved onto the

Daemon he had been shaking moments ago and the group that surrounding him, but neither of us were able to even slow down their progress.

The Humans eyed me warily, but when they saw I was trying to help they didn't push me away. I took that as a good sign for our future interactions, because we would have future interactions. I wasn't letting her go now that I knew she was real and right in front of me.

My eyes connected with the man she shared a resemblance with an understanding passing between us that surpassed any spoken language. She couldn't be allowed to step through that portal.

Oswald

My brain was struggling to compute what was happening, but there was no time.

At the sound of the first screams, I was running from my room to see what was going on. Junie was out there, and I was suddenly feeling very stupid for letting her go outside on her own. It wasn't safe, but her garden was warded. Only she could get in, so I thought she would have been okay.

Clearly, I was mistaken.

'Mister Drudner? What's happening?' one of the younger girls asked as she peered out from the small crack between her door and its frame, fear and uncertainty urging her to remain safely hidden behind it. I recognised her from my class. Agnes Faith.

'I don't know, Miss Faith,' I admitted, my voice tight. 'Close the door and stay inside until someone gets you,' I instructed and then tore off down the hallway to the main entrance once her door snicked shut and I heard the lock click into place.

Just as I stepped foot outside the dorm building, Hawthorne and Enid came running around the side of the building, almost colliding with me as they skidded to a halt.

'The academy is under attack,' Hawthorne exclaimed.

I swore loudly through my teeth, the dread spinning in my gut picking up speed. 'She went to her garden,' I told them, unable to say my sister's name out loud in front of an audience. I just hoped they knew who I was talking about.

‘Juniper?’ Enid asked.

I nodded curtly. ‘I shouldn’t have let her leave,’ I berated myself, but there was nothing for it now. Time travel wasn’t possible no matter how many had tried, so the only option was to be her backup in the fight.

‘Who’s attacking?’ I asked as I led them toward the section of the forest where I remembered she kept her garden.

Hawthorne huffed a humourless laugh. ‘You’ll never believe it, man, but they’re not... human.’

I frowned even though he couldn’t see it with my position in front. ‘What?’

‘We don’t know what they are,’ Enid admitted.

‘What do they look like?’ I asked as we approached the treeline.

‘Like that,’ she responded in a shaky voice. I turned to see what had caused her fear and followed where her finger pointed to the right. Stepping out from the treeline was a tall man with light features that softened his hard build. Muscles upon muscles with veins popping as he wielded twin blades, he glared at us through deadly eyes bisected with silvery scars from previous battles, but it was what his braided hair revealed.

Two long, narrow ears tipped with sharp looking points.

There was no way...

Immediately, my thoughts went to the tomes currently stashed in Junie’s room. He wasn’t here for them, was he? Were they seeking the information hidden inside, just like we were?

Full lips pulled back in a snarl as he bared his teeth at us and growled. The sound was almost musical, but the deadly intent had my hands raising in preparation to fight him off.

Thorne took up a fighter's pose beside me, and on his other side Enid pulled out a dagger. From where I had no clue, since she was wearing form-fitting yoga pants and a tank top so there was nowhere to really hide them...

The Fae saw our defensive positions and charged, blades slashing through the air with a whistle that spoke of skill and experience. He was faster than I'd anticipated so I wasn't quick enough to prevent the blow to my face. Thankfully, I dodged it enough that it only sliced through my eyebrow, the sting of the wound close enough to my eye that I knew he wasn't messing around. This guy was going to kill us if we didn't put him down first.

Without thinking, I shoved my palm against him and shouted a spell that would incapacitate him without killing him. He may have wanted to kill us, but he was Fae after all. It hadn't escaped me that capturing a Fae could give me and Junie a chance to translate the tomes faster, and it was worth a shot.

‘Enervo!’

His eyes, a light blue so pale that they were practically white, widened as my magic washed over him and depleted him of his strength. His arms sagged where they held the twin blades which fell to the ground with a thud since his fingers no longer had the strength to grip them. He dropped to his knees, then tilted to the side where he lay, too weak to move. It wasn't a pleasant spell, but it was necessary now. I really didn't want to kill him and this was the quickest way to incapacitate him.

Unfortunately, as soon as he hit the ground shouts sounded in the distance mixing with the sounds of more blades clashing and animalistic roars.

‘Gods above,’ Thorn and Enid muttered breathlessly as we turned our attention toward the central courtyard that connected the three campuses. There was an odd divergence between two groups. One was fighting, though it seemed it was vicious protectiveness over the second group that were dazedly forming a circle around an iridescent shimmer floating in mid air in the centre of the courtyard.

A portal. It was growing by the second and sending off waves of powerful magic that I didn’t think we could overcome while also holding back the enemy.

My head whipped toward the trees when twigs snapped beneath heavy footsteps. First to exit a short distance away was another Fae and I tensed, ready for another fight, but he didn’t even seem to see me, his attention rigidly fixed on the strange growing shimmer.

My heart sank as the next to step out was Juniper, her gaze just as blank and just as transfixed on that shimmer as the others. She walked woodenly as if someone else was controlling her movements and panic seized me, stalling the breath in my lungs.

Another Fae stepped out behind her, also caught in the haze of whatever magic was responsible for their catatonic states and my stomach twisted with unease. What the fuck was going on?

I took a step toward Junie, intent on halting her progress when a battle cry sounded from behind me. All three of us turned to defend ourselves against another attack, only this time it wasn’t a Fae. Instead, it was a giant, muscular woman charging right at us. We watched on in horror as within moment her teeth elongated into fangs as her face seemed to push outward to form a muzzle. Next, her nails sharpened into claws, thick grey fur spread across every inch of skin and her bones cracked and twisted until they reformed into a completely different shape. Lastly, and most horrifically, her voice morphed from undeniably feminine to a monstrous growl. Furry lips pulled back in a wicked snarl as drool dripped from her jaws.

She was a Shifter.

‘Fuck me,’ Thorne swore under his breath. He sounded like he was about to vomit.

We didn’t get a chance to process what we’d just witness because she was already on us. Well, she was already on me . I didn’t know why she kept coming for me first, but as soon as our bodies collided made sure my palm was flat against her thick grey coat and I practically screamed the same spell as before.

‘ Enervo!’

The magic hit her even faster in my panicked state, throwing her off of me as her entire body wilted beneath the spell. She collapsed into a heap, but I didn’t stick around to see if she was alive. I needed to get to Juniper.

She had taken a spot within the circle that was forming around the shimmer in the time it had taken to deal with the Wolf chick, and I raced toward her knowing my friends would be at my back. Only we weren’t the first ones to reach her. Instead, a massive man with purple skin and deadly-looking horns had stopped in front of her. His expression almost made me pause, shock and tenderness radiating from him. I ran faster, however, when he slowly reached a hand up, aiming for her face.

Oh, hell no. No man was touching my sister without permission.

Thankfully, we reached her in time to block him from laying a single lilac finger on her, but what happened next happened so fast I was barely able to keep up. The shimmer sent out a wave of magic that seemed to have two intents. One was to draw those caught in its grasp closer, and the other tried to repel the rest of us. I didn’t let it, forcing myself to stay by Junie’s side and attempt to pull her back.

Tinky Winky and I shared a look and an understanding passed between us. For now,

whatever animosity we held toward one another didn't matter. It was clear he wanted to help and I wasn't about to turn that away. I didn't care who or what he was, nor did I care to look too closely at the long, curved horns protruding from his head that ended in wickedly sharp points, but I recognised the way he was staring at Juniper. There was longingly there, awe, and protectiveness as if he wanted to shield her from the ongoing battle. It was the look of a man who had just found a reason to live, and while I wanted to pummel the asshole for daring to look at my sister that way, I wasn't about to deny the extra set of helping hands.

Thorne was practically growling at him like that Shifter had growled at us, his possessiveness over Juniper presenting itself publicly for the very first time, but even he didn't shove the purple man away. He and Enid attempted to grab hold of Junie as well, but there simply wasn't room. As she was pulled away from us by the strength of the portal's call, it was increasingly difficult to hold on. The repellent aspect of its spell made it impossible to maintain our grip.

To my heart-sinking dismay, our combined effort simply weren't enough.

She slipped through our fingers just like all the others and was sucked through the portal.

It pulsed once, then caved in on itself like a dying star, shutting off any connection I had with the person I loved most in this world.

'Fuck!' I screamed into the now empty space. I wanted to scream her name but it got stuck in my throat like always thanks to the damn curse, so I stuck with spewing my own curses instead.

'What the fuck,' Enid whimpered beside me, her eyes wide in shock and horror at where they'd all disappeared.

Another voice, one deeper than I'd ever heard before like rocks grinding but somehow smoother,

spoke up in a language that sent shivers of trepidation down my spine. It was guttural and beautiful at the same time but also exuded a sense of wrongness I couldn't shake.

I turned wild eyes on the purple man, wondering why he would try to help. I didn't even know what he was so I doubted he knew about us, and he had no real reason to want to help. My brain supplied the image of his expression when he first walked up to Junie, and I had to physically restrain myself from launching at him.

'Who and what the fuck are you?' I demanded, but his eyebrows only dipped over his eyes as he tilted his head to the side. Confusion. He didn't understand my words.

I sighed and shook my head in frustration but decided it would be better to at least know that man who wanted to cart off my twin to his sex layer. Or perhaps it wasn't about sex, but I highly doubted it. No one looked at someone the way he looked at Junie without wanting to fuck them.

I pointed to myself. 'Oz.' Then I pointed to him with an eyebrow raised in question.

He copied the motion and thankfully provided his own name rather than repeat mine. 'Phenex.'

Hawthorne stepped up beside me, his entire body vibrating with untapped rage. Junie was my sister, but my best friend had been in love with her for a long time now. I couldn't imagine how he would be feeling, especially since they didn't actually have any sort of relationship. Regret swamped me as I tried not to feel guilty about keeping them apart. It wasn't intentional. It was the damn curse. I would never trust anyone with her besides him because I knew he would take care of her, and she him. They were a match made in heaven kept apart by a devil's curse.

The true definition of star-crossed lovers.

And I hated that I was a part of the reason for the gaping chasm between them.

‘What are you doing?’ he asked, his voice hard.

‘Guys...’ Enid tried to interrupt, but we ignored her.

‘He wanted to help,’ I said simply, unable to elaborate.

‘Guys...’

‘Why would he want to help? He’s not even one of us,’ he grouched.

‘I’m not looking a gift horse in the mouth, Thorne. The more muscle the better and he seemed... friendly enough.’

‘Guys!’

I swivelled around to glare at Enid only to stop short at the fear I could practically taste as it emanated from her.

‘Enid?’ Throne took a step to her but stopped when her eyes darted behind us.

Slowly, we turned to see what had freaked her out so much, only to come face to face with an entire horde of panicked supernatural beings we’d previously assumed were myths. Or extinct. Either way, they were not supposed to be here right now.

‘What the fuck is going on?’ asked Hawthorne, his voice merging with dozens, possibly hundreds of others. There were so many different languages it was hard to keep up or pick out our own amid the chaos and my head started to pound.

My eyes drifted back to where Juniper and the others had disappeared, and my heart clenched with worry. I wanted her back, or at the very least to have gone with her to keep her safe. But the portal's magic was intricate enough that only those caught in its siren song were transported to wherever it led to.

The voices rose in a wave, washing over us with the intensity of their emotions.

'Everyone's going to start trying to place blame soon,' Hawthorne concluded as we watched the rising angst among the crowd.

'Is there a way to calm everyone down before people start dying?' Enid asked. She may have been from the Belladonna Coven, the Femme Fatales of the supernatural world – well, I guess the Wiccan world – but they only killed for money. There was no money to be made here today.

'Fuck this,' Hawthorne mumbled, then stomped to the patch of grass where the portal had been floating.

Suddenly, as if responding to his presence, it flickered back to life. Within moments, Hawthorne's face went slack and he was rooted to the spot, trapped by its spell the way Junie had been moments before.

And then I heard it. The drumming she had mentioned to me earlier that I had stupidly dismissed. It was coming from the portal, a calming sound that called to me from my very soul. It wanted me, and I knew that where it led was where I was meant to be.

Hoping it would lead me back to Junie, I let the magic encase me in its warmth and allowed the spell to take hold.

Juniper

I blinked awake to find myself standing in a dark cavern, the only light shining dimly from a single sconce embedded in the rocky of the far wall.

There were others spread out, though they were too far away to catch a proper glimpse of. They were mostly just shadowy silhouettes that I only realised were people because they moved.

No one called out, each of us taking in our new surroundings while trying to figure out what the heck was going on. I wracked my brain to recall any memories, but the last thing I remembered were the Fae, Evander and Aspen, and Aspens dagger at my throat. And then the drumming...

Oh, shit. We had been magically hypnotised and transported to what looked like a pocket inside a mountain. I scanned the space to find the Fae or someone I knew, but it was no use. We were too far apart and there was no picking out individual features. I would just have to move forward under the assumption that these were strangers and mama taught me never to trust a stranger.

Suddenly, a distorted, disembodied voice boomed throughout the cave. It felt like it should have been shaking rocks loose from the walls and burying us alive, but the physical realm had no reaction. Everything was still.

‘ The Unity Trials have been initiated. Succeed and survive or fail and perish. The First Trial has commenced.’

Well... that wasn't ominous at all...

It was slow at first, but movement soon picked up as everyone began trying to figure a way out. I stayed put knowing my best chance would be to cast out my Earth magic to get a lay of the land and find any obstacles or threats. This was a trial of some sort, and it sounded deadly, so I wanted to be sure I knew what I was getting into before I made any moves.

If there was anything that I was completely sure of, however was that I wasn't going to make it out of here alive on my own. It was called the Unity Trials for a reason, and that little clue hadn't gotten past me. I was going to have to find an ally before whatever these trials contained left me for dead.

But first, the lay of the land.

I closed my eyes and breathed in deeply of the stale, musty air, wrinkling my nose at the scent. It smelled a little like cheesy feet and a lot more like rotting meat. Not a good sign. If there was anything I knew about the Earth it was that there was always a balance. With life came death. It was inevitable, but the dangers it posed right now were more concerning to me. I needed to find which direction it was coming from so I could avoid the predator responsible.

Because that smell, rank though it was, confirmed that there was at least one, and I doubted it would be friendly.

I pushed my magic out in a pulse I kept subtle to avoid the others detecting its presence and assuming the worst. I didn't know what the others were capable of, if there were more than just Fae interspersed throughout the cavern. The magic reported back to me in the form of an image inside my head. The cave itself was a giant bubble in the centre of what seemed to be a system of offshoot tunnels that all converged here. The only way out would be through one of the tunnels, but which

one?

My magic kept creeping along so I quickly pulled it back, afraid I would accidentally brush against the creature that called these tunnels home and draw its attention. I had no idea if it would even be able to sense me, but I didn't want to take that risk. If I could sneak out of here unnoticed, that would have been great. I was vaguely satisfied with the general knowledge of the immediate vicinity that I was comfortable enough to take the time to try to find an ally or two.

I could probably use Arden and Evander's weapons at some point, though my magic should suffice to at least keep me alive. Hopefully.

With a bit of pep in my step born from my eagerness to get this show on the road rather than actual happiness, because let's face it, things weren't looking so great for me in my current circumstances, I headed towards the centre of the room to start my search for new friends.

The closer I got to the shadowy figures, however, the more space opened up between us. It was like they saw me coming and were actively avoiding me. My heart sank a little at that, knowing my best chance for survival here would be to team up, but I wasn't about to give up that easily. I could practically hear my mother's voice berating me from here. Juniper Olwyn, you are not a quitter.

It seemed everyone was moving away from the centre to spread their hands over the walls as they searched for a way out so I rerouted, heading instead to where a group had accumulated. My eyes had adjusted well to the darkness so I was able to get a better look at them when I was close enough to recognise them all as Fae. In fact, if I squinted, I thought I could make out the faces of the two Fae I had recently met.

Confidence bolstered by even the smallest grain of familiarity, I strode forward with a pleased grin already stretching my cheeks and inserted myself in their circle. 'Hi!'

Evander and Arden stood side by side and blinked at me in surprise. Or perhaps it was the brilliance of my smile. I had been told on numerous occasions that it could light up a room, and this room in particular needed it more than any other.

The shared a glance with each other and then the other members of their group. Words were exchanged in a lyrical language I couldn't understand until they came to some sort of consensus, then Evander stalked toward me with a frown darkening his eyes. My heart sunk, the coming rejection stinging more than I would ever admit. I thought we'd had a bonding moment back before we found ourselves down here, but apparently that meant nothing in the face of hardship.

Well, at least it was better to find out now that he wasn't worth shit. Time to move on.

He raised a hand and patted the top of my head, the condescending action shooting fire through my veins. How dare he?

I swatted him away, giving him a little taste of that fire as sparks danced along his skin, threatening to catch light. He jumped away, startled, then met my scowl with one of his own. I huffed and spun on my heels, my unbound hair whipping behind me with the momentum and I hoped it smacked him in the face. I could just find someone else who would appreciate me and what I could bring to the table before completely dismissing me like I was an incapable child. Little did they know I was anything but, and I hoped it bit them in the ass.

The Fae tittered behind me as if they were making fun of him, or me, but I ignored them. It was when I heard the booming laughter nearby that I turned to look. A heavily muscled man stood close by with skin so dark he practically blended into the shadows. The only reason I was able to see him were the fact that his yellow, serpentine eyes were glowing like a beacon in the darkness. The hissing sound he made with his laughter clued me in that this man was a Shifter, his second form likely

something scaly and slithery.

But I wasn't able to dwell much on my awe of his species even existing, let alone in the same space as me, breathing the same air, because he was making crude gestures at me that very clearly poked fun at my size. I was short, I could admit that, barely scraping past five feet tall, but it had never hindered me before and it certainly wouldn't now. I turned a thunderous look on him which only made him laugh harder. He really thought I was my height was that pathetic, huh? Well, I'd show him. I'd damn well show them all. All he could do was turn into an animal, and perhaps he even had the ability to tap into those animalistic traits in his humanoid form but I still held more power in my pinkie finger than he did in the entirety of his tiny brain. I wondered if it rattled about in his skull, knocked about by the shaking his laughter caused. I could see the brain damage happening right before my eyes.

Jerk.

I scanned the room for the umpteenth time, searching for any Witches or Warlocks I could team up with, but I couldn't seem to find any. Oh well, I would just have to go it alone and hope for the best.

I sent up a quick prayer to Hecate, asking for her assistance getting out of this maze of rock alive. A warm sensation filled me, prickling at my skin to let me know that she had heard me and was on my side. I quietly thanked her, then again when I felt her urge me toward one of the offshoot tunnels I'd catalogued nearby.

I hid behind a stalagmite large enough to cover me as I climbed inside, ignoring the derogatory chuckles and undoubtedly snide remarks from those I was leaving in my dust. They hadn't gotten far enough to even find one of the offshoots yet, so they could kiss my ass.

I was glad for all the times I'd scaled the dorm buildings over the years, the practice

coming in useful now as the tunnel's entrance was quite a significant height from the ground. I knew that as soon as I entered, however, there was an almost vertical decline that, worst case scenario, I could use my Earth magic to create some steps to make it easier to walk down. I could even remove those steps to make it harder for anyone who followed me, but I dismissed the idea as soon as I had it. I wasn't a cruel person and I didn't want to condemn those people to death, bully or not.

Just as I was about to reach the top, a gust of wind suddenly swept over me and pushed my hair into my face, further mussing the already tangled strands even further. I huffed in annoyance but it got stuck in my throat when I tilted my head up to see where it had come from and my eyes connected with a vivid green that, though they were glowing like the shifters, they may as well have been with how bright they were.

Eyes that belonged to a man almost as stacked as the Shifter with his muscles of full display with his bare chest. But it wasn't the mouthwatering abs and pectorals that drew my attention, nor was it the simple piece of fabric he wore like a loin cloth that didn't do much to cover the thick outline of a long, girthy cock, sizeable even when soft that strained against the flimsy material. I took all of it in within a blink of an eye before I focused on what really grabbed my attention. The source of the wind were the giant, white-feathered wings protruding from his back that beat with an immense amount of strength to keep him aloft, and my breath stalled in my lungs at the stunning sight.

He was a gods-damned Angel .

His eyes shifted from mine to the gap in the wall just above my head and understanding dawned in those bright green depths. He whistled once and a flurry of feathers sounded as an entire host of Angels flew up to meet him. He said something in a deep, baritone voice that normally would have sent delicious shivers down my spine if it were for the underlying arrogance coating his words, but the other Angels

didn't seem to notice. Instead, they listened raptly and then followed him obediently as he charged into the tunnel, the sounds of their beating wings echoing loudly back into the cavern.

Well, shit. If that was the tunnel that led to the predator, they'd just thrown my plan for stealth right out the fucking window.

Grumbling under my breath, I began the journey back down. I would need to find a different way out now that my gut was screaming at me that they'd just drawn the predator right to us.

I jumped the last foot or so, landing in a slight crouch to find myself surrounded by the snickering Fae and Shifters. I pulled up short when I noted another race thrown in the mix, one with varying shapes and sizes of horns protruding from their heads, a few even with bat-like wings rustling behind them, and all in a wide range of colours.

Daemons.

Well, that rounded out the list of so-called mythological beings. Now we just needed a unicorn and a dragon to put the cherry on top.

I noted that the Daemons weren't making fun of me, however. They eyed me up, their gazes bouncing between me and the offshoot tunnel I'd just abandoned with a curious glint in their eyes that matched the colours of their skin. The monotone colouring was odd to see, but beautiful in its own right, especially when my gaze landed on a stunning scarlet woman with small black horns and curves in all the right places. Her pouty crimson lips pulled back in a sultry smile when she caught me looking, and I wondered if she was some sort of sex Daemon.

It didn't really work on me, though, since I wasn't sexually attracted to women. She caught on quickly, her smile losing its sexual lure though it was impossible to lose its

sensuality as well – it was very clearly just a part of her – and she beckoned me over with a friendly wave.

Excited to have finally found a potential ally though still a little concerned I had yet to see any other Humans in the cavernous chamber, I pushed through the still snickering crowd and practically bounced over to her, extending my hand to greet her with my grin firmly back in place.

‘Hi! I’m Juniper.’

She tilted her head to the side as she listened to my language that would have been utterly unfamiliar to her, and I facepalmed at making the same mistake twice. It was easily fixable, though, and I patted my chest. ‘Juniper.’

She smiled back in understanding, nodding her head to acknowledge me and tapped her own chest. ‘Qarinah.’

I tested the name on my tongue, liking the way it ended almost on a sigh. I had a feeling that was intentional on her parent’s part, giving her a name that could only add to her appeal. I mean, even though I was completely straight I still found myself unable to tear my eyes away from the fullness of her breasts as they rose and fell with each breath. The woman exuded sex so much that my clit pulsed just from being near her. It was a wonder I could even still think straight.

I liked her.

I liked her even more when she tried to communicate with me with gestures rather than words, bypassing the nonsense as she waved in the direction the Angels had just left with a single, perfectly arched eyebrow in question.

I rolled my eyes and scoffed, then grunted like a neanderthal and beat my chest,

ending my display by running my finger across my neck like it had been slit to indicate they were going to die.

She watched it all, vacillating between amusement at my admittedly terrible acting skills and horror and what I was expressing to her. When she backed away from that particular tunnel, proving she'd understood, I was glad. My instincts were telling me she was someone I'd want to keep around.

Grunting from behind me drew her attention and she pursed her lips at what she saw. I turned to look, finding that same Shifter with the glowing yellow eyes mocking the way I'd just communicated (successfully, I might add) with exaggerated movements and noises. He even went so far as to raise the pitch of his voice to mock how high mine was, and that was the moment I decided I'd had enough.

Now, it wasn't normal for Witches or Warlocks with the ability to manipulate the elements to create something out of nothing, but I was fortunate enough to also have an affinity for Conjuring which was how I was able to make vines grow from where they previously would not have grown and where no seeds lay dormant beneath any soil. They snapped out of my fingertips, twisting and growing, thickening into sturdy ropes that I used to wrap around his body and constrict like the snake I believed him to be, squeezing until he was barely even wriggling and his chest could no longer expand to take in a breath.

All humour fled as his Shifter friends watched on with wide-eyed surprise and the Fae stumbled back, all of them stunned into silence.

I urged the vines to move so he was pinned in place against the stalagmite I'd previously used to hide behind, then prompted them to let up just enough for him to keep breathing.

I may have wanted to teach him a lesson, but that didn't mean I wanted to kill him.

‘That’s quite enough from you and your half a braincell, asshole,’ I spat at him.

When his wide, panicked eyes met mine like he expected me to finish him off, my vines retreated back into my body where they dispersed back into the magic they came from, humming delightfully inside my veins. He fell limply, hitting the hard ground like a ragdoll and I turned away from him, effectively dismissing him to refocus my attention on the only person in this gods-forsaken place that had shown me even an ounce of respect and kindness.

I extended me arm in the direction my mind-map of the tunnels showed me we needed to go. ‘Shall we?’ I asked Qarinah.

I knew she couldn’t understand my words, but she at least understood my intent. She nodded, a pleased smile tilting up her lips as she fell into step beside me. The other Daemons that had watched the interaction trailed behind us, smarter than the other three races combined.

When we reached the other tunnel, this one opening through the floor where it met the wall, I finally found the other Humans. They had congregated near the single lit sconce which was why I hadn’t seen them before since it rested on top of a large, rocky shelf. They were completely hidden in the shadows. Clever.

Thankfully, I recognised one particular face amid the crowd. George Morven was a friend, though we’d not be as close since he’d accused me of crushing on Oz. The curse had forced me to distance myself from him in case our secret was revealed after he began noticing too much, but I was pleased to see him now. I waved and he returned the gesture, though anxiety had his eyes darting everywhere as the group huddled together.

I waved them over and it took a moment for them to pluck up enough courage to leave the false safety of the shadows, they joined me and the Daemons.

‘Hey, June,’ George greeted me.

‘Hi, Georgie,’ I gave him a small smile I hoped helped soothe him a bit, but I didn’t think there was anything that really could.

‘What was that over there?’ he asked, point in the general direction of where I’d left the Shifters and the Fae though I didn’t turn to look. Also, if they’d watched all of that go down, why hadn’t they tried to help me? Or at least let me know they were there.

I hid my annoyance with a pasted-on smile and a shrug. ‘There are bullies in every realm, apparently.’ And fake friends too, it seemed. ‘Just teaching them a lesson. We should go, though. The tunnel I was trying to go through would have led us out, but those idiotic Angels ruined any chance of stealth. This tunnel system belongs to some sort of predator, so we need to move before it finds us.’

‘Wait... hang on a sec. What predator?’ he all but squeaked. Georgie had never been a particularly courageous man so I couldn’t imagine the fear he felt being thrust into the unknown like this. I tried not to take his previous inaction as a slight against me.

‘Can’t you smell the rotting meat?’ I asked.

His nostrils flared as he lifted his nose in the air and sniffed. ‘No. Just stale air from the cave.’

‘Well, there’s no time to get your nose checked right now, Georgie, but we’ve been dropped in something’s home and we need to leave before it gets pissed at the intrusion.’

‘Gods above, June. What the fuck is even happening?’

‘I know as much as you do, George. I’ve just managed to scope out our immediate surroundings. The other tunnels either loop back around or have dead ends. There were only two that kept going when I stopped scanning. I just hope you’re not claustrophobic because this way is gonna be a tight squeeze...’

I nodded hello to the others, clasped hands with a few, and turned back to face those gathered around me. I pointed at the hole, speaking for the benefit of my people while hoping the Daemons would get the gist of it.

‘We need to crawl through there. There’s a steep incline on the other side and I don’t know what trouble we’ll find along the way, but I do know this is the way.’

‘Thanks, Juniper,’ someone I didn’t recognise spoke up, relief dropping their shoulders as they had one less thing to worry about. Navigating was only one part of the challenge. Facing the unknown threats that lay ahead was what would either kill us or not, but we would need to stick together for any chance of survival. It didn’t take a rocket scientist to figure that out, so I cast aside any negative feelings towards my own people.

Succeed and survive or fail and perish.

It didn’t matter if they hadn’t stepped forward before, I wasn’t about to leave them to die.

Qarinah took the place on my other side and grasped my hand in hers, the action creating a sense of solidarity I’d been searching for when I’d first approached the Fae. I beamed at her then tugged her to the hole, ignoring the way my people panted after her like she was water in a desert. I could tell she was holding back on whatever magic that ensnared horny idiots but I hoped they would be able to control themselves. We’d wasted too much time as it was and we needed to get moving.

I knew in my bones that whatever predator called this place home would catch up eventually, but I wanted to make sure we had a head start before the inevitable encounter. Hopefully, it would give us enough time to make a plan or two while we had the chance.

Rakshasa

I stared after the little slip of a woman, my jaw hanging so low it was practically scraping the ground. At first glance I'd thought she was a child, her happy smile and bouncy personality leading me to believe she was just an ignorant, naive little thing that would get us killed if we tried to protect her. Strength was paramount in Shifter politics.

Calling it politics was probably taking things a bit too far. We didn't have councils or governing bodies. We had the strongest protecting the weak, or Nature killing off the weak to keep us strong. There was no place for a little girl.

And then I'd gotten a closer look. She was no child. Her stature may have been small, but those curves, hidden beneath layers of cloth in a strange style that covered her from her neck to her toes, was undoubtedly womanly. Her breasts were what caught my attention first. I couldn't see much of them, but they were round, perky, and an obvious protrusion that marked her of breeding age.

That was why her personality grated so much. She was so pathetic, following around those Fae idiots like they were going to be friends or something. When she'd stormed off in a huff I'd even followed her to see what she was up to next. It really was good to have a laugh. But then those Angel bastards caught on to what she was doing and found a tunnel, flying through it and leaving her behind. She'd taken one look at them and ran the other direction.

I'd thought she wasn't going to last long here at all, that I'd never seen something so blatantly pitiful in my life.

Oh, how wrong I'd been.

I could still feel the burn of her vines from where they'd rubbed my skin raw, the prickly sensation of my body healing bruises and a few cracked bones. She wasn't weak at all, and she'd defeated me .

That changed everything.

Small she may have been, but she was also fierce and capable. No female had ever succeeded in knocking me off my feet, let alone almost crushing the life from my lungs. Her strength clearly didn't lie in the physical, but magical strength was just as appealing. She was strong enough to take me on, and I had yet to find a female so worthy of me.

Whether she realised what she'd done or not, I was now hers. Hers to mate. Hers to breed. Hers to do with as she pleased. My cocks stirred just at the thought and my soul screamed ' finally!' but my brain was telling me to be cautious.

I couldn't tell if she knew we were following her, but we stuck to the shadows regardless. I shifted into my second form as my serpentine body was stealthier and quieter than my feet and slithered after her newly acquired followers. The rest of my clade took a moment to decide if they were going to join me, but ultimately they did. I was their Alpha and I had just found the woman who would rule by my side. Many would challenge the tiny Human and I was looking forward to it. I wanted to see what else she could do, if she was truly Alpha Mate material or if I'd just lost my position.

The shame would be... indescribable.

We stayed at a distance so as not to spook them, keeping an eye on their movements.

' Alpha, what are we doing?' Arcturus, a strong bear shifter within my ranks asked

through the clave's mental connection. I would have considered him a friend, but Alphas did not have friends. We had responsibility.

‘Following her.’

‘Yes, but why?’

‘Because I already underestimated her once. I will not make the same mistake again,’ I hissed.

He backed down, tilting his chin to his chest in submission when my eyes flashed at him in warning. My forked tongue poked out to taste his fear, and while I could still taste it in the air it was more muted than it should have been. The little Human had diminished my authority already, and I couldn't have that. I hissed, seething at this unforeseen turn of events. I should have been prepared for anything, and I certainly shouldn't have been bested by a slip of a woman I'd mistaken for a child.

Shame filled me from nose to tail as I slithered after her, my rage growing into a silent and deadly thing as I watched her continue to charm the Daemons and Humans alike.

Fine. If she wanted to play, I'd play, but the next time she wouldn't catch me unawares. I would lie in wait, study her from the shadows, determine her weaknesses, and then I would strike. But it couldn't be quick. I needed to re-prove my worth to my Clade before they turned on me entirely, for an Alpha was worthless on his own.

I took in her bright smile with straight, white, blunt teeth. The way her hair swished from side-to-side as she walked, her hips swaying to the same rhythm. I noted the way she was more keen on the Daemon female than her own kind, and how the Humans followed her but still kept their distance.

If I could have smiled in this form I would have, because I had just found my in.

Soon, I would challenge her, and I was going to win.

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 4:07 am

Oswald

‘The Unity Trials have been initiated. Succeed and survive or fail and perish. The First Trial had commenced.’

Bright light shone through my closed eyelids. I didn’t want to open them, but I knew I didn’t have a choice in the matter. I had to find Junie.

I squinted as I cracked them open, blinking rapidly as my eyes adjusted to the intense light. I sent my healing magic there to help ease the way, sighing in relief when I was finally able to open them fully and take in my surroundings.

I was standing in a meadow, the tall green grass waving in the slight breeze and interspersed with white, pink and yellow wildflowers. Enclosing the meadow were tall trees with leaves of a variety of colours, ranging from the typical green and autumnal oranges to unusual pinks, blues, and purples. They looked like flowers themselves, and if it weren’t for the textured bark I could make out on the trunks that were also in strange shades I may have believed them to be so.

‘Oz!’

Hawthorne was calling my name. Tracking the source of his voice I found him picking his way in my direction with Enid trailing behind him like the loyal little puppy she was, though I was glad to see the both of them were okay.

‘Oz,’ another voice, closer and deeper, called to me. The strange sound like rocks grinding clued me in that it was the purple guy from before, and I turned to my right

for the confirmation. Sure enough there he stood, dark hair curling around his impressively large, black horns that, with a closer examination under the brighter light of the sun, I realised were actually a deep shade of purple. I bet Junie would have gotten a kick out of his monotonous colouring.

My heart clenched with worry. I'm coming, sis.

'Who even are you, man?' I asked him, my anxiety over losing Juniper and whatever was going on here coming out as anger. I didn't mean to take it out on him. He'd tried to help after all, but I could also tell he wanted to fuck my sister, and since he was a complete strange as well as an entirely separate species, I wasn't so cool with that.

I was, however, perfectly happy to let him tag along if he continued to make himself useful. I figured the more the merrier when it came to trying to survive this place. What did that disembodied voice say again? Oh, yeah. Fail and perish. No thanks. I chose succeed and survive, thank you very much.

Hawthorne and Enid finally caught up, both of them eyeing up Twilight Sparkle over here with a wariness, though I might have seen a flicker of interest behind Enid's eyes before she turned her gaze back towards the man she was really after. I could practically see her heart beating through them, begging him to reciprocate her love even though he never would.

Barf.

'What is this place?' asked Thorne, taking in our strange new surroundings with a keen yet awed eyes.

'Apparently, it's the first trial,' I replied, picking apart the words I'd heard upon my awakening.

‘Right. But what the fuck are these Unity Trials anyway? Why are we even here? And where are Juniper and the others?’

‘I don’t know, but I intend to find out. Let’s go explore, see if we can find any clues for what we need to do to find our people and get the hell out of here.’

‘Oz,’ Twilight Sparkle called my name again, and his demanding tone had me rounding on him ready to fight. Except he only looked at me with a patient expression, his arm extended as he pointed towards the treeline.

No. Not the treeline. One tree in particular that stood taller than the rest, towering over them all. Its leaves matched every colour of the other trees, its bark also a conglomeration of the colours we’d already seen. If I was correct in my deductions, this single tree had given life to all the others surrounding it. Like a mother.

My instincts screamed at me. Whatever this place was, whatever life forms called it home, I could already tell we were in for a fight of epic proportions just to get out of here alive. What threats came at us, however, I was completely ignorant to. We all were.

Suddenly, I figured it out. The Unity Trials. Five supernatural races, four of which were previously believed to be either myths or long extinct. The new Fae symbol Junie had translated in the tomes.

It was all connected. Fate was leading us. But why?

I looked back at Twilight Sparkle with this new perspective changing everything. He was going to be the key here. We were going to need to work together to survive the coming challenges the Trials threw our way if we were to have a chance of passing and getting out of here alive. That was if we ever got out at all. For all I knew, we were stuck here forever.

Fuck, I hoped not.

Armed with that new knowledge I took a step towards the treeline, only to freeze when a pulse of magic washed over me. It was subtle, more like a gentle breeze than a tsunami of power, but there was something about it that screamed danger!

The grass began to undulate as if caught in the snare of the magic, the movements like choppy waves compared to their previously gentle sway. The leaves on the trees copied the movements, but I could find no pattern in them. The motions were random, starting off slow before they picked up speed, no longer smooth but jerky.

Hawthorne and Enid were already well on their way to those trees, unaware of the danger I felt until Thorne suddenly stopped in his tracks, looked back at me, then his gaze settled uncertainly on the trees. Barney hadn't left my side, and I was oddly comforted by his steady presence.

A series of cracks preceded the sound of thundering footsteps and shouts heading right for us.

I watched, the icy fear running through my veins freezing me in place as one by one the tops of the trees bent and rose much the same way a person's head bobbed as they wove through a crowd. The damn trees weren't trees in any sense I had ever known before, and they were waking up.

Their movements were slow at first, their bark creaking like stiff joints as if they had been stationary for too long and they needed to work out the kinks. Like a domino effect, their roots tore from the earth and they stood at a greater height, the canopy of their leaves shaking like a dog after playing in a muddy puddle, water droplets, twigs and other debris flying off in every direction. I rose my hands to protect my face after a particularly sharp twig scratched a line down my already sliced face, adding to the scars this whole ordeal had undoubtedly given me.

Then, a horde of people raced from the trees, dodging their flailing branches and tripping over the rising roots.

The purple guy who looked like my friend Tinky Winky over here was in the front of the throng, was sprinting right at us. They looked similar enough that I wondered if they were related somehow, but I didn't stop to ruminate over such a trivial matter.

'Phenex!' he shouted in a similarly grinding voice followed by more words in their language I didn't understand. What I could understand, however, was the panicked insistence in his body language. He was running from something, and if a big dude like him with those massive horns protruding from his skull and long, wicked looking talons poking from his fingers was running, then we'd better start too.

The next moment, a root whipped out from the somewhere behind the treeline and snaked around on of the bodies running, yanking him back into their fold and cutting off his shrill scream in seconds. There was no sound of flesh rendering of bones cracking, so I had no idea if he was dead, alive, or merely unconscious. I wasn't planning on sticking around to find out.

'Move!' I ordered, Thorne and Enid already running back to me. I turned on my heel and ran, then halted when I realised there was nowhere to run to. We were surrounded on all sides by trees, and since they were currently the enemy it wasn't the best idea to run straight into their wooden clutches.

I inhaled sharply at the realisation that we were trapped. 'Shit.'

'What do we do?' Enid asked, her voice higher in pitch than usual from her fear.

I racked my brain trying to find a way out, but it was Barney that figured it out. He knelt on the ground, ignoring the chaos surrounding us as people ran around and also came to the realisation that they were stuck, and started clawing at the ground.

Hope lit a fuse up my ass and I bent down to join him. ‘We dig,’ I told her, hands already buried in the soil. It was difficult at first since the grass roots were a tangled mess just beneath the surface, but once we were able to tear through those and get to the softer soil things moved a lot faster. It also helped that Purple 1 and Purple 2 were a lot stronger than us, their claws shredding the roots faster than our blunt fingertips and flimsy nails.

When we’d dug what was essentially a shallow grave the trees had started to converge on the group. A few had seen what we were doing and were frantically digging their own holes, but many had been lost, ripped away but roots, vines and branches. When a woman beside us I identified as Fae due to the pointed tips of her ears was next to be taken, our efforts took on a renewed vigour. They were so close, our lives tilting on a precipice but I didn’t dare look up from my task. Not until Barney and Tinky Winky practically threw themselves inside the grave and started scooping the soil back on top of themselves.

Until that moment I’d assumed we were digging to get as deep into the ground as possible. Like a pit rather than a grave. But those two clearly had other ideas. Ones that were less time consuming and likely to save their lives. I followed suit, calling for Thorne and Enid to copy as well, and soon the five of us were burying ourselves alive.

At the last moment when only my face was clear, I called out to the Witches and Warlocks still digging to do the same and hoped they would listen. I also prayed to the gods that the other races caught on. I didn’t know how well this plan would pan out – we were burying ourselves, after all – but I knew there wasn’t really any other way out of this.

And then the world went quiet. All I could hear were our panting breaths sawing in and out of our lungs from both fear and exertion. There was no more cracking from the trees’ movements, nor were there any more screams or sounds of digging.

I tried to calm my heartrate and slow my breathing, afraid the tree creatures would notice the rise and fall beneath the soil. I'd tried to cover my face as much as possible, but I couldn't bury myself completely for obvious reasons. I didn't even know if they had eyes to see with, or if they had some other method to sense us, but I wasn't about to risk it.

There was a scratching sound from nearby and I heard the low, grinding voice of Barney breathing out a single word that I instinctively knew was a curse, and then a whip-like crack slicing through the air. I felt the wind from it as it past right over my nose, and then a loud, panicked scream as Barney was snatched into the air and pulled away from us. I sat up, my body involuntarily moving to pull him back, but he was already hidden by the shadows of the forest. Barney 2 had also risen to make a grab for him but was too late like me. We shared a look, his more dismayed than mine even though I was no less worried for the large purple guy. We may not have really known each other, but he had shown me in a brief time he was genuine and selfless, putting himself in harm's way for people he didn't even know, let alone have any reason to trust.

But I had made a mistake by sitting up. I was now visible to the tree creatures, and there was nothing I could do a root snapped out from the shadows and wrapped around my midsection, its force pulling me forward so hard and fast the back of my head smacked against my back, already feeling stiff and achy from the whiplash.

I didn't bother making a noise. There was no point. Either I was going to die, or the tree creatures were taking me and the others they had captured somewhere else. As prisoners? There was no way to know until it was over, but I'd take captivity over death any day. I couldn't help Junie if I wasn't even alive.

All thoughts of Junie, my purple friend, or the other fled from my brain when I was thrown into a dark hole, the roots releasing me as I fell. And fell.

That was when I finally screamed.

Juniper

We heard their screams before we saw them.

Bodies fell from the ceiling, dropping through the rock like it was nothing but an illusion, and I wondered if it was just that, a spell to mask the real way out. Perhaps it was, but I didn't have time to think about it when we were scrambling to get out of the way. Some of us – myself included – snapped out of our frozen stupor with enough time to catch them with our magic before they hit the floor. I didn't know how far they'd fallen, but I knew without a shadow of a doubt that many wouldn't have survived, and those who did would have been left nothing more than a broken shell.

At first, I tried to reach for my Air Affinity, but when I touched it, it receded back into my body and escaped my attempts to grasp it. Concerned but knowing there wasn't time to dwell when lives hung in the balance, I quickly switched to my Earth Affinity and wove a tangled web of soft vines in a net to catch them before they hit the floor. It wasn't the best choice since they bounced and rolled into one another, but it was better than nothing. Other Witches and Warlocks with an Affinity for Earth joined me, merging our magic to reinforce the net.

I could hear the others muttering, a few looking down at their hands as if they'd betrayed them and I knew I wasn't the only one who was suffering from an inability to access my other Elemental Affinities.

Most people didn't even know I had an Affinity to all four. My love of gardening was well known so they assumed I was connected solely with Earth. I never corrected

them, choosing to keep the true extent of my abilities to myself. And Oz. He was the only person alive that knew everything there was to know about me. I hadn't even told my parents, afraid what they would do if they found out. They may have raised me and loved me since birth, but we weren't blood. Fear and prejudices ran deep within our community. Those with less power always wanted more, and those with more were constantly under threat. It was safer for everyone if I kept it to myself, so my inability to connect to my Air Affinity was a blessing in disguise.

The bodies stopped falling, though we all waited with bated breath to see if there were any more coming. Just as I was about to gently lower them all to the ground and retract my vines, another body fell. This one was a large, purple Daemon that landed on top of the pile where they had all rolled. I heard a few bones crack and some moans of pain, but otherwise everyone still seemed to be alive.

Then another body fell, his scream preceding him and my heart both dropped in dismay that he was and floated that I wasn't alone. Oz fell on top of the Daemon who seemed to catch him to prevent further injuries to both him and those beneath him.

‘Ozzie?’ I called out to him in our mental link.

His head snapped up and his eyes scoured the crowd of us below as he searched for me. ‘Junie? Oh, thank fuck...’

‘Ozzie, what happened? How did you just fall through the damn ceiling?’

‘Ceiling?’ he asked while carefully extricating himself from the tangle of bodies to reach the edge of the net. ‘We didn’t fall through the ceiling, Junie. We woke up in a meadow surrounded by trees, then the trees woke up and attacked. They threw us in a pit and we fell for ages. I didn’t think there was a bottom...’

I winced, my palms turning clammy at the mere thought of a drop like that and I

hadn't even been the one to fall. 'Shit, Ozzie. That's a nightmare. Are you injured?'

'No more than a cut from the battle at the academy. Can you let us down now, please?'

I absentmindedly retracted my vines. When the warmth of my magic returned to me I realised I'd been shivering and goosebumps covered every inch of my skin, but his words distracted me from it anyway.

'Battle? What battle? Is everyone okay?'

Everyone fell the last distance to the floor and I cringed. 'Oops. Sorry,' I muttered over the groans of pain.

'The academy was under attack, though now that I think about it I don't think we were the target. The portal hypnotised a bunch of you and everyone still in control of their mind and bodies sort of panicked.'

'And panic leads to violence,' I surmised, watching him rise up to standing and wishing I could run over and give him a hug. I needed one, and I knew he'd been craving one, too.

But a prickling on the back of my neck proved that more than one eye was on me, though I felt multiple from opposing directions staring with a little more intensity than the others. I already knew one was the snake dude. He thought he was so clever hiding in the shadows and following me, but the rest of the Shifters weren't so discrete. Plus, he had a habit of hissing and his onyx scales rubbed against the rocks louder than he probably realised. He'd have been better off in sand, or even a forest where other animals and sounds could have masked his.

I decided to leave him be to see what he was up to. He would reveal himself

eventually, and I'd be ready when he did.

'June! Oh, my gods. I'm so happy to see you!' A pair of skinny arms wrapped around my neck and squeezed so hard I felt like my head was about to pop right off, but it was the owner of those arms that had me pushing them away, and not so gently.

'Kendra, what are you doing?' I asked, my tone harsher than I usually let it be as the small smile I had scrounged together dropped from my face.

The bitch had the audacity to look confused. 'What do you mean?'

'The last time I saw you, you were throwing around accusations like confetti at a damn wedding,' I reminded her. If we were back at Aurora Academy I would have smiled and played nice, but I simply didn't feel like it down here in the dark. She had shown me her true colours and there was no place for fake shit in these trials. Unity didn't happen by stabbing people in the back. Or the front in her case since she'd accused me to my face. I'd give her props for that, at least.

Qarinah, who must have sensed the change in me since she wouldn't have been able to understand our verbal exchange, stepped up beside me with a menacing aura that made me kind of fall in love with her a little bit. She was best friend material for sure, and I intended to keep her.

'Who the fuck is this whore?' Kendra sniped, sneering at my new friend. She must have been able to sense Qarinah's innate sensuality on top of her killer curves that were almost on full display beneath the thin material of her dress and was clearly threatened by it. I introduced them, enjoying the little bit of pettiness I felt at having the Daemoness at my back to defend me against the woman I'd once thought was my friend. A shallow friendship it may have been but it was still a friendship until proven otherwise, and Kendra had done so in abundance these past... days? Day, singular? I didn't even know how long it had been since that uncalled for showdown in the

courtyard.

Kendra stormed off in a huff, moving over to where Oz stood with that purple Daemon by his side who I'd just noticed was joined by another purple dude, though all three of them ignored her. She tried to sidle up next to Oz, but he merely pushed her away and kept his attention on me. That wasn't going to help the rumours but in that moment I didn't care. His mere presence was a balm to my soul when everything else was turning to chaos.

But then my eyes flickered to the side, taking in the shirtless piece of purple man-meat at his side. When the Daemon saw me looking, his eyes caught mine and... darkened was too much of an understatement for what they did. No, they smouldered. I was taken off guard by the sudden sexual tension that popped up between us, smacking me in the face with a force that should have knocked me on my ass. My clit pulsed at the erotic promises I found in his gaze and my breathing sped up as I tried to catch my breath.

Suddenly, he prowled towards me like a predator approaching their prey. I felt trapped in his gaze, their depths hard to see in the dim light but no less electrifying.

His pace sped up the closer he got like he couldn't wait one more second to reach me, and I should have felt the urge to run but, much like with the Fae and Arden's blade against my neck, I was frozen in place with excited anticipation. My magic swirled inside me and shoved at my mental barriers as if it was just as eager to reach out to him, but I stayed where I was, patiently waiting for him to come to me. Something big was happening here and I didn't know what it was but I was ready to find out.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity but in reality was only a few seconds, he was in front of me. He stood so close that if either one of us breathed a little deeper we would be touching, but I held myself back, curious what he would do. I heard Oz asking if he needed to step in through our mental link but I sent him reassurances that

I was fine. Instinctively, I knew that this giant purple Daemon would never hurt me.

He towered over me, so his chin was practically touching his chest while I tilted my head all the way back just to maintain eye contact, but there was something soothing about the position, like we had done it a hundred times already. This man felt familiar to me somehow. Not personally, of course. I'd never actually met the man. It was more like our souls recognised each other, like this meeting was meant to be.

Qarinah's silky, sultry voice almost broke through our little bubble, reminding me that we weren't alone and that this wasn't normal, but I couldn't bring myself to care. He responded to whatever she'd said in a voice so deep that it vibrated through every atom of my being and caused the goosebumps to return, only this time they were from the sheer pleasure of the sound and the promise I sensed within it rather than the cold. If anything, I was overheating.

I felt more than saw Qarinah's presence move away. My magic latched onto her, seeking answers. For what, I didn't know, but I sensed she was sulking like a toy being taken from a kid than actually upset at whatever was happening here between us so I pushed her back to the recesses of my mind.

And then he struck.

Bending over me, his lips latched onto mine, soft and pillowy and utterly delicious as I ran my tongue along the seam, eager to taste him. He groaned low and deep in the back of his throat, the sound doing things to me I never even thought possible, then thrust his tongue forward inside my mouth like he was trying to fuck me, its texture silky smooth and absolutely addicting. The closest I ever got to this feeling was when I fantasised about Hawthorne. Guild suddenly stabbed through my heart, but it was quickly replaced by lust when the Daemon man's hands spanned across my back and pulled me closer. My hardened nipples rubbed against his bare chest through the fabric on my sweater and I wanted nothing more than to remove it. I wanted it all

gone. Nothing should have been between us, blocking our skin from making the connection we both seemed to crave with a fiery passion.

When we parted, both of us panting heavily as we fought to regain our breath, I looked around sheepishly, sure everyone would have been either annoyed, disgusted, or confused by our blatant display. Except no one was there, and we weren't even in the same tunnel.

‘What the...?’

‘Where are we?’ the Daemon asked. It took me a moment to realise he'd spoken in English, my head whipping back to stare at him with wide, shocked eyes.

‘You speak English?’

He frowned down at me, confusion swimming in his lilac eyes. ‘I am not speaking this English . You are speaking the language of the Legion.’

I snorted in disbelief. ‘No, I'm not. I've never even heard of that before.’

A single, darker purple eyebrow rose up high on his forehead, an impressive feat I was sure Oz would have appreciated since his only went up so far. ‘And I have never heard of this English you speak of. We seem to have found a way to connect so that we can understand one another. I won't be complaining. Tell me, Beautiful. What shall I call you?’

He stepped even closer, removing any distance between us and lowered his voice as he asked the question. I couldn't stop the blush if I'd tried, my entire body heating up at not only his compliment but the way he was very successfully seducing me.

I giggled. ‘Well, you can keep calling me Beautiful if you want. That works for me,’ I

grinned cheekily at him in an attempt to defuse some of the sexual attention. I actually thought I might combust if he kept it up.

He returned my grin with a smirk of his own, his eyes heating up as they dipped back to my lips that were heavy and swollen from his kiss. 'I can do that, but I need your name, Beautiful.'

'J-Juniper,' I stammered, melting into him when my knees went weak and I could hardly hold myself up any longer.

'Ah, yes. That is what your friends called out when you stepped through the portal.'

I blinked, taken aback by the sudden turn in conversation. I hadn't expected him to already know my name, let alone know anyone I would call a friend since I didn't really have any... Wait. He was sticking pretty close to Ozzie earlier. I wondered what that was about.

I cleared my throat. 'Well, you know my name and you've had your tongue down my throat. You should probably return the favour.'

His eyes flashed with heat and he lowered his lips barely a breath away from mine. 'I enjoyed tasting you, Beautiful. It is no hardship to do so again...'

I giggled again, high-pitched and breathy. 'I meant your name...'

'Phenex.'

'Phenex,' I rolled the name over my tongue, enjoying the way it tasted.

'Indeed.'

Silence encompassed us as neither one of us made the move to close the distance, like we'd both decided to freeze time and take a snapshot to last forever in our memories.

He was the one to break first.

'I'm going to kiss you now, Juniper.'

I let out a barely audible squeak but rose to my tiptoes to close the distance myself. The action shocked him, not expecting me to make the first move, and I took full advantage of his gasp by tangling my tongue with his, desperate for more of his taste.

My hands came up of their own volition (I swear, I had no control over them) to run along the dips and divots of his muscular abdomen. I stroked them higher, pausing at his pecs where I expected to feel two little nubs, only to come across smooth, unblemished skin.

I pulled away and stared at his chest, curious to find them nipple free.

'You don't have any nipples,' I said, and a laugh burst from his chest, the sound so sexy I felt a gush between my legs.

'Why would I have nipples, Beautiful? Those are for feeding babies, yes? That is part of a female's anatomy, and I am no woman,' he said, grinding his hips into me to prove his point. I inhaled sharply at the feel of him, hot, hard and girthy beneath his pants.

'Why aren't you wearing a shirt?' I blurted, causing him to let out another laugh as I took him aback once again.

'A tree stole it.'

I snorted a laugh, the sound completely and utterly unattractive in every way possible, but even though I flushed with embarrassment I lifted my chin and owned it. I dared him to say anything.

Instead of any form of repulsion, however, all I found was tender amusement. And then I brought my brain back to the topic at hand.

‘Right. The trees. Did they really wake up and move around like animals?’ I asked, my curiosity taking hold and leading me towards the rabbit hole.

He scoffed. ‘They did, but I don’t want to talk about trees right now, Beautiful. I want to strip you bare and fill you with my cum.’

My squeak was louder that time, but instead of backing away I stripped out of my clothes in record time. I was all for it. I didn’t know how we’d gotten here so quickly but I wasn’t going to complain. He could paint me with his come any time, inside and out.

‘Fuck...’ he swore as I bared myself to him. His hand snaked down beneath the waistband of his pants and I watched with fascination as he gripped his base and squeezed. I could tell because the veins on his forearms popped and I swooned. Fuck me, I swooned hard.

I nodded vigorously. ‘Yes please. That’s the idea. Clothes off, Phenex.’

‘Yes, ma’am,’ he agreed, any levity completely gone as he obeyed me. It made me feel powerful that this man, technically a stranger even if I felt like I’d known him over many lifetimes, was letting me command him. I liked that a lot, though the thought of him bossing me around was just as appealing. Maybe we could switch it up. I wondered what a fight for dominance would look like between us. I thought I could take him, even if he was unfairly large.

When he shucked his pants, I was proven incorrect. Large was an understatement. This man was going to split me in two, but I was going to love every second of it. I'd just need to ease into it...

'Come here,' he commanded, taking back control with that deep, rumbling voice that made my knees go weak and my brain turn to mush. That was the only explanation for what was happening right now. I wasn't really a one night stand kind of girl, and I never put out on the first date. A man had to earn my body, yet Phenex had shown up all purple and sexy and growly and I couldn't help myself. I had to have him inside me before I died a slow and painful death by empty pussy.

My core clenched around nothing, the ache inside me building to painful levels.

I obeyed.

But I couldn't give him all the power just yet.

Throwing the rest of my admittedly miniscule amount of caution to the wind, I dropped to my knees in front of him and eyed his cock, curious to see if there were any major difference between Daemon and Human anatomy. There wasn't much, mostly just purple colour but most of the cocks I'd had in the past had turned purple eventually, only it was typically just the head.

My hand wrapped around his shaft, my fingers barely able to touch my thumb, and that was when I noticed the difference. And no, it wasn't his size, though that was obvious. On every inch of his shaft there were slightly raised bumps beneath the skin. He was fucking ribbed for her pleasure.

'What did I do to deserve you?' I whispered to it reverently.

'Are you talking to my dick?' he asked, amusement colouring his tone.

I looked up at him from beneath my lashes and gently trailed my fingertips over those little lumps and smirked. ‘Yes. He deserves some affection, don’t you think?’

He opened his mouth to answer but I didn’t let him, licking a path from the base to the tip, swirling my tongue around the swollen head, and then I swallowed him down as far as he could go, opening my throat I wouldn’t choke on his excessive size.

‘Oh, fuck,’ he hissed, and I was suddenly so excited to draw out more of his sounds of pleasure. I wanted to see how many he could make. I wanted to learn every inch of his body and discovered each and every erogenous zone so I could make this large Daemon male crumble at my feet.

I was going to make him mine .

Phenex

My brain blanked as her hot, wet mouth swallowed me down, the sensitive ridges along my shaft scraping lightly against her teeth as she teased them with the flat of her tongue.

When my tip hit that back of her throat and she hollowed her cheeks, my knees gave out and I almost collapsed on top of her. I slammed my hands on the wall behind her, glad for the long reach of my arms since we were in the middle of the small chamber. I didn't even care when the rock dug into my palms, a couple of sharp edges threatening to cut through my skin.

If anything, the pinch of pain heightened the sensations and brought out a long, low groan straight from my chest.

Her tongue undulated beneath my shaft as she bobbed her head, adding to the friction her lips created as they passed over me. I watched, fascinated, as she wet me with her saliva and I glistened under the dim light of the single sconce nearby.

And the slurping sounds she made... they were crude and vulgar and absolutely mind blowing. I wasn't going to last.

Then she scraped her teeth gently against my shaft, the blunt yet strangely sharp edges posing enough danger that my heartrate skyrocketed and adrenaline pumped through my veins. It felt so good that my balls drew up ready to blow my load down her throat. Out of habit I tried to pull away, but she dug her short, blunt nails into my ass and held me inside her, ready to take it all.

I swelled inside her, my guttural yell the only warning she received before I released spurt after spurt of my seed into her greedy little mouth. It was impossible for her to swallow it all, though she tried. It leaked from the corners of her lips as she tried to hold it all in, but I was ejaculating more than I ever had before. Yet when I pulled out of her, she tickled her tongue along the underside of my shaft, eliciting tremors through my legs as my abdomen clenched, a second, smaller orgasm working its way through my muscles.

‘Oh, fuck,’ I breathed, bending low to bury my nose in her familiar green hair. I inhaled her scent as I panted through the aftermath of my orgasms, joy filling me as I recognised her scent. Floral, earthy, and undoubtedly her .

If she were anyone else, I would have panicked at the thought of them holding a piece of my magic inside of them, but it was different with Juniper. She was everything, and the very core of my being recognised her as mine. Trustworthy. Just plain worthy .

My eyes connected with hers and I studied their blue depths, noting the flecks of lighter blue dotted around her irises that were also ringed in a darker navy tone. Her pupils were blown with her desire, desire for me , and what kind of mate would I have been if I didn’t give her the same release she’d gifted me?

‘That pussy is magical, Beautiful,’ I praised her, enjoying the way she both lit up and turned an adorable shade of red that blended well with her bruised lips. It was fascinating how she changed colour, and I enjoyed it so much that I silently vowed to make it happen as often as possible.

I slid my hand from where it had begun to stroke through her hair down to her shoulder. My finger traced her collar bone, the dip at the base of her neck that I wanted to nuzzle and lick and dipped lower to test the pillowiness of the swell of her breasts. I watch with rapt attention as her breath hitched the closer I got to her nipple.

Curious, I brushed over it and my cock twitched at her reaction. A small whimper escaped from her throat, and I wanted to swallow it whole. Realising I could, I bent down further to slant my lips over hers, but something blocked my decent.

I pulled back, blinking out of the haze of lust to see an iridescent shimmer reminiscent of the portal appear between us. It grew to the size of my fist, then dissipated like it had never been there in the first place.

Except something fell to the floor between our feet, proof I hadn't been imagining things.

Juniper, closer to the ground and already on her knees, picked up a piece of paper and lifted it to show me what it contained. I understood why when I saw it was written in the Language of the Legion.

“Connections made, rewards reaped,” I read out loud for her benefit, then watched on with unease as the words reformed into a language I couldn't understand. I gestured for Juniper to read it, assuming it was for her like the first one was for me.

“The curse is the key,” she read, her nostrils flaring as she exhaled heavily through her nose. She flipped the paper, scanning it front and back to see if there were any other messages all the while muttering incoherently under her breath. She seemed spooked as she tossed it aside, flinching as its edges caught on fire and quickly burned to ash.

‘What curse?’ I asked her, confused why that would cultivate such a reaction from her.

Her head snapped up and she eyed me warily, her teeth clacking as her mouth closed, instantly cutting off her muttering. She said nothing.

Suddenly, I wondered if I'd made a mistake gifting this woman a piece of my magic. I had assumed that since she had starred in my dreams for the past few years that she was trustworthy, but the reality of our situation dawned on me. How well did I actually know her? The answer had my gut churning with apprehension. I didn't know her. She was a stranger to me, even if I knew her scent, the way her soft skin felt as it brushed against mine, how her wetness teased my control and now how her mouth felt wrapped around my cock. I didn't know anything real about who she was as a person.

Yet... I couldn't fathom living my life without her in it for another moment. I clearly didn't know her on a personal level just yet, but I would change that. Because I was hers as just as much as she was mine. Though if her secret keeping was any indication I had a long road ahead of me to convince her of that fact.

Fate had shown its hand, but it was our responsibility to listen.

With that in mind, I had a new perspective on the situation. It was egotistical of me to assume that she would trust me enough to be so open with me after only our first meeting. Sex did not equate to love and trust, even though I was already mostly there with her. Both were built over time after consistent action proved our character. I had waited years for her, had been content to love her, remain loyal to her, in my dreams. I could be patient and prove that she could trust me with whatever it was that had disturbed her so. If there was a curse involved, perhaps that was something I could help her with.

But one thing I knew was that now was not the time to reveal the consequences of our actions here. If she discovered my magic inside of her before this curse situation was dealt with, there was no saying what could happen. My magic could be twisted and corrupted by it, for all I knew. It was better for us all if she remained ignorant, because she wouldn't be able to wield it if she didn't even know it existed.

I hoped.

I knew a lot was riding on this decision, but I didn't know what other action to take. All I could do was pray I was doing the right thing. For her.

I stepped closer and took it as a good sign that she didn't move away and pressed a tender kiss to the top of her head. 'Come on. We should find our way back to the others. Oz will be worried about you.'

The mention of her family member snapped her out of whatever it was that glued her lips and she tilted her head in curiosity. 'How do you know him anyway?' she asked.

I smiled down at her and wrapped my arm around her shoulder to bring her close to my side. The physical contact was a relief after years of believing she was a figment of my imagination. Here she was, fully tangible and very real, and I wanted to take full advantage of that.

'I tried to help him and your friends stop you from stepping through the portal.'

She blinked at me in surprise. 'You did?'

I chuckled and tapped her head. 'You weren't exactly present. I don't blame you for not remembering.'

'Right,' she mumbled, all of a sudden taking a particular interest in her feet.

I wasn't sure where this sudden timidity was coming from, but I wasn't having it.

'Look at me, Beautiful,' I commanded, and held back the urge to preen when she immediately obeyed, her expression unmasked. 'There is no shame in what has happened. If you haven't noticed, we all did get sucked in the same way.'

She flushed that brilliant shade of pink, bordering on red this time as she smiled sheepishly. 'Right. It's not that...

'Oh,' I murmured, confused. 'What was it, then?'

She shrugged, clearly uncomfortable with the direction this conversation was taking. 'It's just... isn't it a little weird that you met me in person before I met you? It must have been so weird to see me so checked out, magically hypnotised or otherwise. I don't know, it's stupid.'

Understanding dawned and I held her a little tighter, pleased with her feelings even if I fully intended to reverse them because they meant she wanted to impress me just as much as I did her. 'You're self-conscious.'

She scoffed and backhanded my stomach, though I hardly felt the blow. 'Can you blame me? All I can imagine is me walking around like a zombie with drool dripping from my chin or something. That's hardly attractive.'

I laughed. I couldn't help it. She was so adorable.

'It's not funny,' she pouted, and I wanted to nibble on her full bottom lip when she pushed it out.

I grinned. 'I promise, there was no drool. You simply stared straight ahead and didn't respond to any outside stimuli. You were just as breathtakingly beautiful then as you are right now.'

Her expression morphed into a tentative smile. 'Really? I know it's silly, but you're one of the sexiest guys I have ever seen and I'm... well, most people mistake me for a child which should say enough.'

My excitement over her admitting to her attraction to me so forwardly dimmed at the way she degraded herself, and I felt my brows dip low in a scowl. ‘You do not look like a child. Your curves are blatantly feminine and your sexual maturity is obvious.’

She smirked down at her breasts and gave them a quick squeeze before turning serious once again. ‘It’s not these. It’s my height. Sometimes my clothes hide my figure.’

‘I see no issue with you removing your clothes if it makes you more comfortable and confident,’ I said in all seriousness. I wasn’t one of those men who would tell my woman how to dress, and if she preferred nudity then I wasn’t going to complain.

She giggled and swatted me again. ‘Stop it. Okay, fine. I knew it was silly, but you asked.’

‘It is natural to feel insecure sometimes, and I am glad to have helped you overcome one of yours.’

Her arm snaked around my midsection, her fingers barely reaching around my other side and I enjoyed how small she was. She fit perfectly against me, and I could shroud her with my body if the need ever arose. It settled something within me that I hadn’t even realised was there.

‘You’re pretty cool, Phenex. I like you.’

My heart swelled in my chest at her words and nothing could wipe the beaming grin from my face in that moment. ‘I like you too, Beautiful.’

She pulled away with a sigh and I fought back the primal urge to tie her to me so she couldn’t escape. Obviously, I would never do that. Unless she consented, of course. I knew a thing or two about ropes, and they would look lovely wrapped snugly

around her delectably soft body.

‘We should get dressed and try to find the others. I don’t like that we were separated,’ she said, and she had a point.

‘I wonder why we were transported elsewhere,’ I mused as pulled up my pants and resecured my weapons belt. I fingered the hilts of my daggers, taking solace in their presence. I felt better knowing I had a weapon should the worst happen. I could protect Juniper better with a blade than without.

I lamented the loss of visible skin as Juniper dressed, covering her stunning body from my view with the baggy clothes she was apparently so self-conscious of. I wondered why she wore them if she didn’t like the way they looked on her. I didn’t see an issue with them personally, but it wasn’t my opinion that mattered.

She didn’t look particularly bothered by her clothing choice, however, striding confidently in a random direction. Or not so random since she disappeared into the darkness and I hurried to catch up so I wouldn’t lose sight of her. The shadows surrounded us as we walked down a tunnel I hadn’t noticed, and I was curious how she knew it was there when I didn’t, so I asked.

‘I have an Affinity for Earth. I just used my magic to scan our surroundings to determine which direction to take,’ she told me.

‘An Earth Bender?’ I asked in astonishment, suddenly realising it was her that had created the net of vines to catch those of us who had been tossed into the pit by the sentient trees. Those who wielded the elements were rare among Daemons, and I was even more impressed with my little mate. She was strong and she was capable. I was a lucky man.

‘If that’s what you want to call it, sure. What about you? I’m not really that familiar

with Daemon lore, and I don't know how much of it I've learned is actually true.'

I hesitated, my earlier decision springing to the forefront of my mind. It was on the tip of my tongue to tell her the truth, but my reasons behind withholding that particular piece of information remained and so I deflected.

'I am from the House of Greed,' I told her instead.

'What does that mean?'

'It means different things for different Daemons, but for me it means that I... horde things. Books, mostly. Knowledge.' I almost said 'you' but bit my tongue at the last moment. I didn't want to come off too strong and scare her off. Well, I didn't want to come off stronger than I already had. I had the feeling that her kind didn't go around sleeping with strangers within moments of meeting very often if the reaction of Oz and their friends was anything to go by. From the little interaction I'd had with Humans so far, Juniper seemed a lot more carefree than the others. Significantly so.

She surprised me when she stopped suddenly, tilting her head as if listening for something. I did the same, straining my ears to hear what had caught her attention, but there was nothing. Then she walked over to the wall and placed her palms against it, a wistful sigh leaving her luscious lips before she kept on walking like nothing had happened.

I debated asking her what that was about, but I somehow knew I wouldn't get an answer. My Juniper was brimming with secrets and mystery, but I was looking forward to uncovering it all.

Hawthorne

I didn't dare move. Enid's hand gripped mine to the point of pain as we laid as still as possible and tried not to breathe. I listened, waiting for more sounds of the trees attacking but there was nothing but silence. Silence and the roaring of my blood pumping through my ears.

'Thorne,' Enid's shaky voice cut through the quiet and I startled. 'Thorne, I think it's over now.'

Well, there was only one way to be sure. If we were taken then at least we'd be with Oz again.

Slowly, carefully, I sat upright. Soil and long, torn blades of grass fell from my body like they were a rockslide and I was a mountain, the noise soft in reality but echoed loudly to my own ears. I winced, my heartrate increasing as another round of adrenaline coursed through me and I had to work extra hard to keep the volume of my shallow breaths from drawing any attention.

My gut twisted with dread in that way I knew was a physical manifestation of my Clairvoyance, but my power was telling me that the trees weren't a threat any longer. No, something more terrifying was coming and we needed to get ahead of it before it had the chance to catch up to us.

'Get up,' I ordered Enid in a firm tone that brokered no argument.

'What is it?' she asked, obediently following my commands. She knew well enough

that when I said to do something it was best to just do it and ask questions later.

‘Something’s coming.’

‘More killer trees?’

‘No. Something else. We need to move.’

‘What about the others?’ she asked, grief colouring her tone. I could sense that he was still alive and I said as much to assuage her fears, but he was on his own now. Or not, if that purple guy truly had his back. I hoped so, but right now we had to focus on ourselves.

‘Come on. We have to go. Now,’ I urged restlessly. We were running out of time.

I helped haul her up the rest of the way to standing and held onto her hand as we sprinted across the meadow. My steps faltered when I finally saw the change, however. All the trees were gone, the meadow now an open field as the shadow of the trees moved off into the distance.

Magic twisted in my gut again as I ran the opposite direction and I stopped with a groan. ‘You’re not going to like this, Enid.’

‘Like what? Just tell me.’

‘We need to follow the trees.’

She cursed. Loudly. It roused the few others that had escaped the roots’ clutches and heads popped out of the ground like the Hun army after the avalanche in Mulan , mounds of dust and dirt cascading from their heads as they emerged. There weren’t many, perhaps a dozen or so of various races, but I didn’t stick around to count.

Enid and I took off in the direction my power was leading me, ditching those who didn't follow but not stopping those who did.

A scream sounded behind us that was quickly cut off with a garbled, strangled noise like someone was choking. I didn't want to look but I couldn't stop Enid from turning to look over her shoulder. She stumbled, a whimper catching in her throat at whatever it was she saw and I couldn't help myself. I needed to know what the new threat was we were facing.

What I saw didn't make much sense. A black cloud, like pollen congealing in the air settled over the ones that hadn't moved fast enough. It dispersed as it made contact with someone, settling into a stream that then poured itself into any available orifice it could find. Eyes, ears, nose, mouth, it was like they were sucking it inside themselves despite their frantic attempted to get away.

Black veins spread out from where it entered them, and even from here I could see their eyes bleeding into black as they choked on it, gasping for air they could no longer receive. They fell to their knees and heaved, then convulsed on the ground and contorted into painful angles as the infection took over their bodies.

I didn't need to see any more.

Still holding onto Enid's hand, I yanked her with me as I sprinted as fast as I could as far from the black smoke as possible. 'Move, move, move!' I shouted out into the air, praying to the gods that those closest to us understood my words enough through my tone to snap them out of their horrified stupor and run.

A chilling shriek pierced through the air, followed by another, and then another. I didn't turn to check if those that were infected were giving chase. The only thing that matter was the next leap, the next breath, the distance we put between us.

I lost track of how long we ran. When we felt ourselves begin to slow as exhaustion took hold we muttered a simple spell to replenish our energy to keep going.

The trees finally began to slow enough for us to catch up when the sun began to dip down below the horizon. I should have felt wary about entering wedging myself into their closed ranks, but I couldn't bring myself to feel anything other than relief. The shrieking had long since softened to a mild echo in the wind, and I would rather be with Oz in whatever hell he was facing than go head-to-head with a malicious cloud.

I wasn't sure how happy I was that the trees didn't bother us when we joined them. They behaved as if they didn't even know we were here, so I didn't think we would be reuniting with Oz and the others any time soon. However, we were safe for now beneath their multicoloured canopy, their equally as colourful trunks now stationary as their roots dug into the ground to fix them in place.

Exhaustion pulled at me and I took the risk of sitting down with my back leaning against the trunk of a tree. We were deep enough inside their ranks that we could no longer see beyond, and though I knew it was a false sense of safety since we were still stuck in these damn trials, but I felt a little better at having the added barrier of the trees between us and that smoke.

Enid practically fell in my lap as she collapsed beside me, leaning heavily against my. I wrapped my arms around her, seeking the comfort we both needed.

'What are we going to do?' she asked in a small voice.

I sighed tiredly through my nose. 'Whatever we have to do to survive.'

Without warning, my muscles seized and I groaned in dismay as the telltale signs of an incoming vision took control of my body. My eyes rolled into the back of my head and I began to ache as my muscles began to convulse, the reaction beyond my

control. I felt Enid lower me gently to the ground and whisper soothing words in my ear, and that was the last I felt or heard before the vision sucked me in.

For the third time I was forced to endure the heart shattering scene of Juniper being intimate with another man. This one wasn't as unusual as the others. There were no brightly coloured skin tones or rippling scales, but he certainly wasn't human either. In fact, this one was remarkably familiar and it took a moment for the memory to resurface. He was one of the Fae that had been hypnotised alongside Juniper, one of the two that had walked out of the forest with her as they were pulled to the portal.

Long white hair that was falling out of its braids in the heat of their passion cascaded around their faces like a thin curtain blocking them off from the rest of the world. The tips of his pointed ears poke through that curtain that she reached up to caress. He seemed to like that, a deep, vibrating groan vibrating from his chest at her touch, and I wanted to hurl at the way his muscles bunched and sweat rolled down his pale skin as he thrust forcefully inside her.

She cried out, enjoying the rough way he fucked her and grabbed at him as she attempted to pull him closer. What hurt the most wasn't even seeing her with another man. It was the way they looked at each other with so much awe and wonder, the love shining through so clearly as they came together.

I had wanted that with her for what seemed like my entire life. I could hardly remember a time when I hadn't been in love with Juniper Olwyn, and now I had just been forced to watch her fall in love with three other men and none of them were me.

As the vision dissipated around me I caught sight of the other two in my periphery. Lilac and darkness watched over the couple lost in their passion. Which one would she choose?

It seemed an important question, like the fate of everything in existence depended on

the answer. Why Juniper's love life was so imperative to our survival I didn't know, I just knew that her decision would make or break us all.

When I blinked away the last vestiges of the vision, my power sinking back beneath my skin, I was greeted to the sight of Enid looming above me. She had my head in her lap and was stroking my hair away from my face, a look of tender concern creating a deep V between her brows.

'Hey, you. That was a rough one, huh?' she spoke in a low voice, considerate of the wicked headache she knew I'd have as a result of the amount of power it took to receive a vision that potent.

I groaned, my entire body aching as I moved to sit up. She helped, supporting my back and helping me scoot back until I was once again resting against the tree. Sweat stuck my shirt to my torso, rubbing uncomfortably against my skin. My nipples pebbled through the material scraping painfully against my shirt whenever I breathed.

'Here,' Enid said as she held out a large leaf filled with water.

'Where did you get that?' I asked her, my movements slow as I took it from her hands and lifted it to my mouth.

'Believe it or not, the trees.'

I almost choked on the cool liquid at her words. 'What?'

Her answering smile was one of disbelief as she gestured to where more leaves lay filled with water, fruits, nuts, and berries. 'The trees noticed you having your vision and they brought these.'

I glanced between her and the brimming leaves, then up to the tree I was resting against. Tentatively, I pressed a hand against a root that was poking from the ground and gave it a gentle pat. 'Thank you.'

A branch suddenly descended from above, slowly reaching down to me where it ruffled my hair and then rose to rest facing the sky.

'Holy shit,' I gaped and Enid giggled. It was a sweet sound that caused the cogs in my brain to start moving. It was the same giggle as the woman I wanted, but it was familiar and comforting in its own way.

I looked at her then, really looked at her. Smooth, tanned skin dotted with the occasional freckle. A small beauty mark beside her nose and another one beneath her eye. Full, luscious lips I'd already had the pleasure of tasting. Her breasts were large and I knew from experience they were comfortable to rest my head on. And they were fun to suck on, too.

Guilt swamped me as her eyelids lowered, her eyes darkening with lust at my perusal of her body. I hated that my heart was taken by a woman who didn't even want it. Who didn't even know she had it. Not for the first time I wished that Enid was that woman. She was gorgeous and loyal, she knew me inside and out, and I trusted her implicitly. She was also in love with me, which was more than I could say for Juniper.

Her gaze hardened and her lips thinned when she noticed the change in my demeanour, already knowing where my thoughts had taken me.

'I'm sorry,' I whispered dejectedly.

'Want to tell me about your vision?' she asked, probably assuming it was a change of subject but in reality was just rubbing salt in the wound.

‘Which one?’ I asked, scrabbling for a little more time before I projected what I’d seen into the world. It would be more real then. Once I acknowledged it, I wouldn’t be able to take it back. I wouldn’t be able to pretend I’d never seen it.

She tilted her head to the side, the mind already starting to piece things together. She was too smart for her own good sometimes.

‘They were about her, weren’t they?’

I was suddenly very focused on dirt covering the hem of my jeans, but I nodded to confirm her suspicions.

Seeing my utterly defeated, pathetically sad reaction, her hardness softened and she placed a supportive hand on my arm. ‘What happened?’

I took a shaky breath in a failed attempt to ground myself, but I pushed ahead anyway. There was no point in prolonging the inevitable any longer.

‘I keep getting visions of her... with other men.’

‘Oh, Thorne...’

I hated the pity in her tone, anger rising in me that she felt the need to pity me at all. But I pushed it to the side. She didn’t deserve to have me take out my frustrations on her.

‘This was the third one. The third man. I think...’ I hesitated, struggling to get the words past the lump in my throat. ‘I think she has to choose one of them, but her decision will have an impact on us all.’

‘Wha... How so?’ she asked, stunned. ‘Why her?’

I shrugged half-heartedly. 'I don't know. I just keep seeing her having sex with these men, and none of them are Human.'

'Do you know who?' she asked tentatively.

'The first one was that purple Deamon that tried to help us keep her from stepping through the portal. The second one... I don't know, I think he was a Shifter but I didn't recognise him at all. This last one was one of the Fae that walked out of the forest with her when the portal called to them.'

'Shit... that's... Fuck, Hawthorne, I don't even know what to say.'

'There's not really anything to say. The Fates are laughing at me.'

'You don't think they want you to help her choose, do you?' she asked, horrified.

'I think that's exactly what they want me to do,' I muttered glumly.

'No,' she said firmly and my head snapped up in surprise.

'No what?'

'If it's that important she choose out of these men, then I'll be your middleman. You won't have to talk to her about this at all if you don't want to. I can't relay any messages you need to tell her.'

I shot her a small smile, pleased with the way she was trying to take care of me. To protect me. 'No, it's okay. You don't have to do that. I'm a big boy and I've known for a long time that nothing was ever going to come from my feelings for her. I can't keep running from it.'

She eyed me suspiciously. ‘Are you sure...?’

I nodded decisively. ‘I’m sure.’

‘Well, the offer still stands. If it ever gets too much for you I can take over any necessary interactions.’

She released an adorable little squeak when I reached out to her and pulled her to me, my arms wrapping around her in a tight embrace. ‘Thank you,’ I whispered into her hair. ‘If it comes to that, I’ll let you know.’

I pressed a kiss to the top of her head and she relaxed into me. We stayed that way for the rest of the night. While we took turns sleeping so the other could keep watch, neither one of us let go. Neither one of us wanted to.

Juniper

The sconces that lined the walls of the tunnels became scarcer, appearing further apart the longer we travelled. I wasn't afraid of the darkness, but I was definitely afraid of what lurked inside it, so when we found ourselves almost completely blind I uttered a quick spell that lit up my fingertip like a torch.

‘Lumen.’

Phenex startled at the sudden illumination, throwing his hands over his eyes to stop the bright barrage of light against his unadjusted eyes.

‘Oops. Sorry. I should have warned you beforehand,’ I apologised. Since it was my own spell my eyes automatically adjusted and I forgot for a second there that it wouldn't be the case for anyone else around.

‘Adapto,’ I muttered under my breath, enjoying his look of surprise when he was suddenly able to see.

He shuddered, looking at me from beneath heavy-lidded eyes. ‘Your magic feels like a sexual caress,’ he informed me and I blushed.

‘No one's ever said that before...’

He chuckled, the sound low and full of heat. ‘Next time, I'll be the one caressing you, Beautiful. I know we were interrupted, but I fully intended to finish what we started.’

I inhaled shakingly and accidentally choked on my saliva in the process. His eyes widened in alarm as I coughed and spluttered and he moved to help but I held up a hand to ward him away. Because that wasn't embarrassing. At all. So attractive.

'Right,' I cleared my throat another time when my voice came out scratchy. 'Okay. Maybe we should wait until we're out of here before... that,' I finished lamely, wondering where the powerfully confident woman from before had gone. I wasn't a shy person, but I also wasn't the most experienced when it came to dating. Not that we were dating. It was just sex.

But even as I had the thought I knew that wasn't true. This was more than just sex. The idea of letting him go, of him being with another woman made my blood boil and my rage sing.

'What is happening?' he asked, voice full of concern as he watched me attempt to rein in my overload of emotions. 'What's wrong?'

'What is this?' I blurted out, motioning between us with my finger.

His expression softened immediately and he wrapped his arms around me, tugging me close and nuzzling his nose in my hair. He inhaled deeply, a low, purr-like groan emanating from his chest. 'This is everything.'

I melted into him, a piece of my heart dislodging from my chest and embedding itself inside his. I couldn't have stopped it even if I'd wanted to, and I most definitely did not want to. Nothing had ever felt so right before, even if it was insane to think so of a man I had only just met.

It should have terrified me, and maybe a part of me would finally feel that fear when I fully processed what was going on between us, but the larger part of me knew that we were exactly where we were meant to be. Was it fast? Lightning speed, but I was

oddly okay with that.

‘You feel like mine,’ I whispered into his chest.

I could feel his heart skip a beat beneath my cheek as his breath hitched in his lungs, and his arms tightened their hold around me. ‘I am yours. And you are mine.’

I couldn’t decide if I wanted to cry, laugh, or do a little happy dance, so I somehow managed all three while still in his hold. He was stunned for a moment, unsure what was happening, but then he relaxed and joined in, wiggling against me. The silliness broke through the any lingering tension and made me laugh even harder, my tears drying up as I enjoyed the moment.

When I pulled away, he held my eyes with his own, a seriousness taking over once more. ‘You are... okay with this? I know it’s a lot...’

The sudden shift within him to this display of vulnerability was absolutely adorable, and I appreciated his concern for my feelings more than he could understand. It chipped away at my walls a little more until they were practically crumbling. The only thing holding them up now was the damn curse, but if that piece of paper was anything to go by then Oz and I were on the right track to breaking it and it would finally stop interfering with our lives.

I saw the way he shut down earlier when the curse had glued my mouth shut, suspicion clouding his eyes. I’d wanted to answer him, was screaming the truth inside my own head, but no matter how hard I fought against it nothing came out. My frustration grew as I couldn’t even let that out in case it was another indication that something wasn’t right and I felt like I wanted to burst out of my skin.

But maybe...

It wasn't the first time I'd had the thought, but no one had taken the initiative to work it out yet. However, if Phenex figured it out on his own, perhaps that would bypass the curse and he could help us.

If anyone could or would, I had a feeling it would be him.

With renewed hope I prayed wouldn't bite me in the ass, I grinned up at him. 'I'm not going to deny that this is beyond normal, but I also don't really care. I kinda like that we're bypassing all the usual steps and getting right to the good stuff. Whatever happens, I'm not going anywhere.'

He relaxed at my words, his hand rising to cup my cheek and I leaned into his touch. 'You have made me the happiest man in the world. In all the worlds, because apparently there's a lot...'

A laugh burst out of me. He wasn't wrong.

'All right, Romeo. As much as I'd love to stay here with you, we need to find the others.'

He blinked at me in confusion before his features scrunched into a fierce scowl. 'My name is Phenex, not Romeo.'

I barked out laugh and slapped his arm. 'I know your name. Romeo is a fictional character from a play. He's famous for being a romantic.'

The indignation seeped from him and he gave me a sheepish smile that drew my attention back to his lips. I had to the urge to taste them again and realised that I could, so I did. He moaned softly into my mouth as our tongues brushed lightly against each other, the kiss softer than before yet no less passionate. In fact, as impossible as it seemed, it was the most intimate kiss I had experienced.

It didn't last long, and when we pulled away Phenex had a dreamy smile on his face that I knew matched mine.

'I don't think I'll ever get used to that,' he admitted softly.

My response was to press my lips against his again, lingering a little longer than planned.

'Okay,' I said, enjoying the breathiness in my voice. This shit didn't happen to people like me and I was fighting to wrap my head around it, but at the same time I was enjoying every moment and trying not to overthink it. 'We really should keep moving now.'

He sighed but nodded. 'You're right. Let's go.'

Neither one of us let go as we continued down the tunnel.

???

I didn't know how long we'd been walking but both of us had begun to feel the effects of the long day. We were hungry, thirsty, and with my energy depleting so was my ability to maintain my spells. My finger light kept flickering, so I'd dimmed it and only sent out spurts of my magic to search for the correct route.

We were going to need to stop soon to rest at the very least, but we would need food and water before long. Only there was nothing around but rock. There wasn't even a single trickle of water seeping through a crack. It was all so dry and dusty and my throat was starting to hurt from the lack of moisture in the air.

'Let's just stop for the night,' Phenex urged when he cast yet another side-long look of concern my way at my wheezing. I usually had at least some form of drink within

reach, so I wasn't handling the situation as well as I would have liked. I tried not to let it get me down, but it was hard to maintain a positive attitude when all I wanted was a tall, cool glass of water. I was close to drinking my pee, it was that bad.

'Are you okay?' he asked when I coughed, his hand tightening on mine like I was about to turn to dust and float away on the wind. I felt like my throat was already halfway there.

'Yeah,' I croaked. 'Just thirsty. We need to find water soon.'

'Okay. In the morning. For now, rest.'

We settled down beside one another, Phenex's back propped against the rocky wall while I crawled half onto his lap and rested my head on his bicep and I let the light spell go, plunging us into darkness. I would have been on his shoulder but he was so tall that I couldn't reach, even though we were sitting down. With anyone else that might have made me self-conscious, but with Phenex I loved the way his larger frame covered mine. It made me feel safe and protected from whatever monsters lurked in the dark.

It was kind of like a fort, and I enjoyed every second of it.

I was just starting to snooze, snuggling into his oversized chest when I heard something that stopped me from fully nodding off. At first I thought it was coming from Phenex, but then I realised it was echoing from further down the tunnel. A shuffling noise that I struggled to pinpoint until it got louder. No, not louder. Closer. The closer it got, the more defined the sound became until I was able to pick out the individual footfalls of stampeding feet, and they were heading right for us.

Phenex and I sat up at the same time and if it weren't for his arm wrapped around my waist I would have been thrown right off his lap. He didn't even give me the chance

to get my feet beneath me before he was hauling me upright, my littler legs dangling helplessly while I clutched at the singular arm holding me up, afraid he was going to drop me. That fear fled me quickly when I realised he was literally so strong that he was holding my weight as if it were nothing with only one arm.

I ignored the tingles of desire his display sent through my system (I mean, who doesn't like a man that's strong enough to throw them around?) and focused my attention on the approaching crowd.

'What do we do?' I ask in a low whisper.

'We stay hidden in the shadows. Wait for them to pass. We don't know who it is or what they want.'

'But what if they're running from something?' I asked, the possibilities and the unknown ratcheting up my anxiety levels.

'Then we run, too.'

My body already ached in protest, but I prepared myself just the same.

Shouts suddenly reached us from what sounded like right around the corner, and then the first person barrelled through. I couldn't see, but I could hear the rapid footsteps and a man's laboured breaths. More followed in quick succession until one shout caught my attention. The voice was familiar even if the tone warped it, but it reminded me of Evander, lyrical and smooth. Had we just come across the group of Fae?

More voices shouted, though the inflection ranged from panicked to commanding. Low and behold, the commanding voice belonged to Evander. I was sure of it now. He came tearing through the tunnel, taking up the rear as a plume of smoke chased

his tail, illuminated by the giant fireball heading right for him.

The fireball didn't just illuminate him, however. Our eyes met, his widening with shock to see me and Phenex hiding in the shadows, but there was no time to dwell on our surprise appearance. He yelped as the fire bit at his heels, and I acted before I could think through my actions.

I raised my hand and with the last bit of energy I possessed I performed another spell.

‘Integumentum!’

My eyes drooped low as the last ounce of energy shot from my palms to envelope us all in a protective, impenetrable layer of magic. It was an advanced shielding spell that was typically reserved for an individual during hand-to-hand combat. Pushing out that much magic to cover an entire group of people was draining, and my head pounded with the effort. I felt blood drip from my nose and trickle down the side of my neck where it streamed from my ears, my body working overtime as I forced myself to stay awake long enough to maintain the spell until they could get rid of the threat.

Unfortunately, they didn't seem to grasp what I'd just done, so I gestured wildly for Evander to turn back around, weakly acting out a stabbing motion like I held a sword. When he glanced between me and his not-so-singed body, understanding dawned and, with a battle cry that spoke of experience, he lunged back down the tunnel. More Fae followed his lead, leaping in after him with their own blades raised.

It was only after I heard an agonised screech that quickly died down, the sounds of flesh rendering as blade after blade tore whatever it was apart did I finally allow myself to release my hold on the spell. The last thing I heard was Phenex's panicked voice in my ear as I slumped fully in his arms, unconsciousness dragging me under with a small, satisfied smile on my face.

Phenex

I had never felt such terror in my entire life before Juniper slumped over in my arms. The blood in my veins had turned to ice and I felt light-headed as all the blood drained from my face. I could tell when Juniper rose her hands and released that spell that she was risking a lot to save them. Her energy was already depleted from a long, trying day and an overuse of magic without any water or sustenance. She had given every last piece of herself to ensure these strangers' survival, and though I fell even more in love with her for it I also wanted to shake her and scream and demand she never do something so reckless again.

If she died saving those Fae... heads would roll .

My free hand rose to her face and I gently patted her cheeks, ignoring the sounds of battle as they continued to rage just out of sight. A second beast must have appeared after the first was slain, but I couldn't focus on that when Juniper remained unresponsive. Next, I gently laid her out on the floor and checked her pulse. My heart kickstarted again when I found one, but it was weak. Fuck, it was way too weak. She needed a healer, and she needed one now.

I shouted, my neck straining with the force of my yell as I tried to grab someone's attention. Anyone's. I didn't care as long as they could heal her. Except no one heard me over their own cries, caught up in the battle and bloodlust as they slayed the beasts that hunted them.

I tried again, this time grabbing the attention of the closest Fae. A tall female with pale hair that cascaded almost to the floor. She was cowering behind the rest of the

group, blades shaking in her grip. Clearly she was not a warrior, but I respected her for at least plucking up enough courage to stand with her brethren.

Her gaze bounced between me, Juniper, and the battle before her, and the decision was easy enough for her to make. She darted over to us of swift, light feet that spoke of athleticism even if she didn't apply it to combat. She knelt down before us and took a closer look at my mate, studying her with a critical eye.

She spoke, her voice high and lilting though her words were nothing more than illegible sounds to me, barely audible above the fighting. I shook my head at her, frustrated that we couldn't communicate effectively. Thankfully, she understood the severity of the situation enough to take action. She extended her hand toward me. I didn't understand what she was after at first, but then she used her other hand to pick up mine and pressed our palms together, wrapped our fingers, and shook firmly. Just once was all it took for me to feel the tingles of magic sinking through my skin.

A deal had been struck.

Just as soon as the magic settled inside me I felt it. Like a straw had been placed into my very soul, energy was dragged out of me at an alarming rate. I cried out, the pain of my lifeforce being forcefully taken too much for me to bear and I crumpled to the ground beside Juniper. Agony flared throughout every atom of my body and my mouth gaped open in a silent scream.

My pain didn't matter, however, when I saw the colour return to Juniper's face. Her cheeks pinkened, her breaths deepened and evened out, and her eyelids as she slowly roused.

When she opened those big, blue, beautiful eyes and they immediately latched onto me, the pain finally ceased. I was panting, sweat rolling over every inch of my skin and plastering my hair to my face and my clothes to my body. A chill ran over my

bare chest as her breath cascaded over me, and then she gasped.

‘Oh, gods. Phenex... What did you do?’ she cried, tears gathering in her eyes before they spilled over and down her cheeks. She leaned over me, her hands cupping my face as she fussed about, but when I tried to tell her not to worry I could barely even move my jaw let alone get the words out. I was too exhausted, too relieved that she was okay.

I hated seeing her cry over me. I wanted to tell her I was going to be fine, that my energy would replenish after a good night’s sleep. That was the benefit of being a Djinn. All we needed was a bit of rest and we were good to go.

The reminder that she didn’t even know what I was or the extent of my power was one last punch to the gut as I let sleep take me, and my last thought before I sank into its warm depths was that I needed to tell her the truth. I never should have kept it from her in the first place. She deserved more than that from me, even if she was keeping secrets herself, but that was okay.

When I woke, I vowed, I would tell her everything.

Juniper

‘P henex... Phenex, wake up,’ I pleaded as I watched his eyes close the rest of the way. He seemed content, but it only made my panic greater. He couldn’t leave me when I’d only just found him...

I glared at the Fae woman still kneeling beside us, her gaze darting between us with a curiosity that I wasn’t willing to sate while Phenex was fading away.

‘What did you do to him?’ I demanded.

She couldn’t understand my words, but she certainly understood my pain. With soft eyes, she acting out a handshake and I felt my world tilt on its axis. The Fae were said to have been tricksters, the stories warning never to make a deal with one because they always backfired. If Phenex had made a deal with a Fae to bring me back from the brink of death I would bring him back and kill him myself, because magic always had to come from somewhere and the rules of bargaining with a Fae were clear.

He had given me his lifeforce to keep my alive while he took my place on death’s door.

Relief swamped me at the realisation because I hadn’t been at death’s door at all. Sure, my energy was depleted, but I just needed to replenish it. Some food and some rest was all I needed and I would have been right as rain.

I collapsed beside him, my forehead resting on my knees as the sounds of the Fae slicing the creature to pieces, even though I was fairly sure it was already dead,

created an ironically macabre backdrop for the moment. The Fae hesitated for a moment before joining me, mirroring my curled up pose as she peered over her knees at the scene before us.

I startled when she jumped to her feet, her posture rigid as someone approached. I couldn't see much, but there were enough embers still burning from the fireball that I could see it was Evander approaching, a contingency of Fae following a short distance behind him. Each of them were covered in blood, their fair features stained crimson in a sight that was oddly beautiful in its violence, and I couldn't help but admire Evander's ethereal beautiful as he stepped closer.

He exchanged words with the woman and she scuttered off to rejoin the ranks of the other Fae. She cast one last glance in my direction, curiosity shining through her eyes before she was swallowed by her people and hidden from my sight.

Evander took her place beside me, crouching down until he and I were at eye level. He studied me for a beat before coming to some sort of conclusion, then extended his hand. My brows shot skyward. If he expected to make a deal with me he was sorely mistaken. He must have read the words in my expression because his lips twitched in amusement that he quickly covered up. Instead of dropping his hand, however, he patted me on the shoulder the way one would a friend, then rose to join his comrades.

'Leave this one alone. She saved our lives and Elvina has repaid our debt,' he said and I startled when I could understand his words.

'Evander?' I called out to him and he stilled, then turned to face me with an enigmatic expression. 'I understood that.'

He sucked in a shocked breath, his entire body tensing at my words. 'I understood you, too.'

A murmur exploded behind him as everyone processed the significance of what he'd said, and it was curious to me how they didn't seem to understand me as well.

I nodded behind him. 'Your friends don't seem to,' I pointed out.

'How?' he demanded in a hard, suspicious tone.

'I think it's these trials. Phenex and I can understand one another but... well, I guess we never got the chance to see how far that extended since we were separated from everyone else.'

'You should find your people. It is not safe here without them,' he said, then as if that was the most important piece of knowledge he could have imparted on me, he turned and strode back to his people. As one they left without another word, though a few glanced at me and Phenex as they headed in the direction we had come from. I supposed it may have been a little more difficult to pass whatever mess they'd left behind of those creatures, but as he was dismissing me and leaving me to my fate I decided to let him find out the hard way he was headed towards a dead end.

Instead, I settled down beside Phenex and snuggled into him. I struggled with his heavy arm as I wrapped it around my body, enjoying his warmth. I exhaled slowly, releasing all my annoyance and the stress of the past few days in that one breath. I knew it would come back eventually, but just for now I wanted to sleep without the burden of the Unity Trials, cryptic clues that appeared out of nowhere, or mysterious prophecies and life-ruining curses. Just for now, I wanted to sleep peacefully by the man I had decided would be mine forever, and who seemed to agree wholeheartedly.

???

I felt like I had only closed my eyes for a minute when I was jolted awake by the sound of shuffling nearby. At first I thought it was just Phenex moving around, but

then I nuzzled into his warm body, his arm tightening around me and I realised it couldn't possibly be him.

I bolted upright, my eyes wide as they attempted to adjust to seeing in the darkness. I couldn't see at all, which was how I figured out what the sound was. People were using the walls as a guide, brushing against them as they walked.

I nudged Phenex, rocking him awake. He mumbled something unintelligible as he roused, but a quick smack to the shoulder shut him up. His hands shot out to feel me, patting me down as if he were reassuring himself I was here, that I was real. Or perhaps it was the other way around, if he'd believed he was giving his life for mine. My heart melted even more for him and I pressed myself against him again, pleased when he immediately calmed. His breath ruffled my hair as he sighed and I leant further into him.

He finally seemed to notice the others because he tensed again when he heard the shuffling sounds. I stroked my fingers lightly over his forearm to soothe him, knowing it was just the Fae returning after discovering the dead end. He relaxed minutely but wrapped his arm around me to pull me back into his lap, and then he rose, holding me to him with one arm like he did before. Unfortunately, we weren't as quiet as intended. He must have miscalculated the distance to the wall and ended up scraping his horns over the rocks, drawing the attention of the Fae.

They stilled, not even a breath to be heard, and then I a yell I recognised as Evander's cut through the quiet and they sprang into action.

I cursed under my breath then lifted my finger to illuminate the space again. 'Lumen!'

They flinched back from the light, covering their eyes from the sudden assault but recovered quickly. They pushed forward again, Evander leading the charge only for

his eyes to widen with recognition before he brought his blade down on us. Phenex took advantage of his hesitation to shove him back before he put me on the ground and shoved me behind him, crouching protectively in front of me with a snarl.

Evander shouted something I didn't understand and the rest of the Fae paused and then backed down. Some sheathed their blades while others kept them out, ready to attack at a moment's notice. I noted some certain looks sent our way, suspicion and distrust the dominant emotion among them.

Evander said something else to them and they backed up further, but what caught my attention was how I couldn't understand his words like I had before.

'Evander,' I called out, and he angled his body so that he could keep an eye on both his people and Phenex who was still blocking me from their view. I peeked out from behind him and asked the question that was making me second guess everything I had thought I'd figured out about the Unity Trials so far.

'Can you understand me?'

His frown told me everything I needed to know. The magic that had previously allowed us to communicate had disappeared, leaving us at an impasse yet again.

Panicked, I turned asked the same to Phenex.

'Yes,' he said and I sagged in relief. The last thing I wanted was for this connection between to us break for any reason. 'I can understand you, Beautiful. What is going on?'

I explained to him how I'd spoken with Evander before and how something had changed to prevent us from understanding one another again. He hummed thoughtfully but relaxed a little more when Evander returned to his people on the

other side of the tunnel. There wasn't much space separating us, but the clear divide eased some of my worries.

And then it hit me.

'Oh, shit. Phenex, I think that's it!' I exclaimed, gripping onto him excitedly and bouncing on my toes.

He smiled down at me with a bemused expression, allowing my excess of energy with a fondness that made me blush. 'What did you just figure out, Beautiful?'

'The Unity Trials, Phenex. I totally have a theory!'

He grabbed my hand that was lighting up the tunnel to keep it steady and I stilled, though my body vibrated with the need to move at the connection I'd just made, and I used my other hand to gesture to the space between us and the Fae. It wasn't just a physical distance, but a metaphorical one, too.

'Think about it. When did we start to understand one another?'

His eyes darkened with a fierce possessiveness. 'After we kissed.'

It took me a moment to realise he thought I'd kissed Evander, and I shook my head rapidly. 'No, not kissed. I didn't kiss him, I promise.'

He relaxed at the reassurance but then squinted his eyes as the cogs started turning in his mind. When he gasped I knew he'd made the same connection I had. 'When we accepted each other. We didn't care about our race, just each other.'

I smacked his arm repeatedly, my excitement getting the better of me again. 'Exactly! Which is why Evander and I can't understand each other anymore. He chose to turn

his back on us and walked away and broke the connection we'd just made.'

'I can understand you,' a light, feminine voice called out and the woman from yesterday that had made a deal with Phenex stepped forward. She flinched away from the scathing looks her people sent her, but she scampered to us in spite of them even if her head remained lowered in submission. She was either incredibly shy and hated the attention or she was afraid of them. Or perhaps it was a combination of both, if their timid way she stood before us was any indication.

She took a shaky breath in and forced herself to make eye contact with me. 'I can understand you both.'

'You're the one that helped us,' Phenex stated, scrutinising her and the Fae's reaction to her stepping out of their formation.

'Yes,' she confirmed. 'I am Elvina.' Her voice steadier now that she knew we wouldn't condemn her for daring to speak and approach us. If that was how the Fae treated their women, I was going to ignore my theory and leave them here to rot.

My glare found Evander's and he glared back even harder. After saving their lives, I would have thought they'd have been friendlier than this, but you couldn't win everyone over, apparently.

'You are figuring it out where others are failing, and you are strong,' she told me. 'I would like to come with you.'

A series of shocked gasps resounded throughout the tunnel, including my own. Surely her people wouldn't take kindly to her deserting them for someone they clearly didn't see as an equal? Although, they didn't see her as one either, so I supposed that wasn't the biggest issue here.

‘Oh, uh... sure?’ I tentatively agreed, looking to Phenex for his opinion. He merely shrugged and moved Elvina to join me behind his protective stance, claiming her as ours now in front of them all.

Outraged mutterings sounded from the Fae, and I knew Elvina’s choice was going to send ripples of doubt throughout their numbers, among a variety of other emotions.

We waited to see what action they would take, but Evander barked out something that sounded like orders and they strode off down the tunnel back the way they’d come as they were being chased by those... whatever they were. I still hadn’t seen them yet, or what was left of them, but they were likely the predators that I had deduced lived within this maze of tunnels.

Their mass exodus halted, however, when they came upon the slain beasts that were still blocking the way. A disgusting squelching noise echoed back to us followed by the sound of someone retching, and I wrinkled my nose. Someone must have stepped in the gore.

I felt Elvina shudder beside me and sent her an apologetic smile. She caught onto my silent meaning and groaned. ‘We have to go that way, too.’

‘Yup,’ I said, inserting some chipperness into my tone to try to lighten the mood. I didn’t really work, but neither of them said anything.

On a positive note, we didn’t have to do any of the work clearing the tunnel to get through. We stood back and waited for the Fae to push the dead things to the sides, then followed at a distance when they moved on. It was dark enough that I couldn’t see all the details of the dead creatures, but I did catch sight of a stray claw or two, an upturned piece of thick, leathery skin, and a severed leg with a bone protruding from multiple places. I did my best not to look at the rest by keeping my gaze fixed on the Fae’s backs, but those parts I did see were going to haunt me for quite some time. I

couldn't even tell what the beasts were supposed to have been they were so mangled.

A few of the Fae that took up the rear kept sending nasty glares at us over their shoulders that caused Elvina to wince and duck her head, so I took her hand in mine and squeezed reassuringly. She didn't respond, but she didn't shake me off, either so I took that as a win.

'Where to?' Phenex asked me in his deep, rumbling voice. Shivers skittered down my spine, his effect on me instantaneous and involuntary but very, very welcome.

Stop it, I berated my vagina.

'Junie?' Oz's voice sounded in my head, faint but audible and I tripped over nothing.

'Ozzie? Oh, thank fuck! Are you okay? Where are you?'

'I'm fine. We're still in the same chamber where you and Tinky Winky disappeared. Where are you? Are you okay? He didn't try anything else, did he? I'll kill him...'

I blushed as he continued his protective brother tirade, unsure how to tell him that Phenex did, in fact, try something. And I let him.

'Phenex and I are fine,' I said, emphasising his name but also trying to contain my amusement because he really did look like a hotter, Daemonic version of the purple Teletubby. 'We're trying to find our way back to everyone else and we ran into the group of Fae. Things are... tense, but I figured something out.' I told him about our theory and how we'd worked it out, and while he needed that information I was mostly just using it to distract him from asking any more questions about me and Phenex. I wasn't really sure how to answer them. What was I supposed to say? 'Hey, brother dearest. I let some random Daemon come down my throat and now we're together because I think we might be soulmates.' Because that would go down so

well.

Silence simmered on the other end of our connection, and I could practically feel the steam coming from his ears.

‘What the fuck did you just say?’ he demanded, his voice low and deceptively calm.

Oh, shit... I hadn’t projected those thoughts to him, had I?

‘Yes, Junie. Yes you did.’

‘Fuck,’ I swore out loud, my feet freezing where they stood like I was suddenly stuck in mud. The mud was my brother’s wrath and my own mortification.

Phenex looked down at me in alarm, immediately on alert while Elvina stepped back like something was going to jump out of the shadows and attack us.

‘What is it?’ Phenex asked, the hardness in his voice exacerbating the gravelly tones.

‘Nothing,’ I squeaked, unable to tell him even though I knew I should. Stupid curse.

‘He’s a dead man. What were you thinking, Juniper? He’s not even Human, for fuck’s sake!’

I tried to hide my wince at Oz’s shouting knowing it would look weird to an outsider, but I wasn’t very successful. Phenex and Elvina both shot me concerned looks, though Elvina’s seemed more like she was concerned for her choice in companions. I didn’t blame her, though I wished I could tell her I wasn’t insane.

‘Does this have something to do with the curse?’ Phenex asked me and I swayed with the speed my blood drained from my face.

‘What curse?’ I asked, my voice a higher pitch than normal which didn’t help me look any less guilty.

He lifted a single brow again in that way that made me think of Oz, and I knew I was caught. There was nothing I could do about it though because I literally could not get the words out to explain.

‘The curse the clue mentioned. You read it out, Beautiful,’ he pointed out and my mouth literally slammed shut. I couldn’t split open my lips even to breathe, they were sealed so well. He noticed and a mixture of hope and trepidation filled me that he would work it out.

‘Is that part of the curse? You can’t talk about it?’

My breathing became so heavy I thought I might actually start to hyperventilate. He was so close. He was right there .

‘I see. I can’t ask you any questions, can I?’ he realised and studied my eyes for any reaction. I blinked rapidly, the only way I could even attempt to communicate with him in that moment.

Elvina’s gaze was bouncing between us and she finally plucked up enough courage to ask the question on the tip of her tongue. ‘What curse? What’s going on?’

Her words attracted the Fae’s attention and they came to a screeching halt to stare back at us. The mention of a curse would likely get that sort of reaction from anyone, but this was not ideal.

‘ Oz... I think Phenex is close to figuring things out,’ I thought to my twin since he was the only one I could actually talk to right now.

‘What? What’s going on?’

‘After we kissed a clue appeared out of thin air. A piece of paper with writing on it. At first it was in the language of the Legion so I couldn’t read it but he could. Then the words were replaced with English and I read it out loud.’

‘What did it say, Junie?’

‘His said ‘connections made, rewards reaped’.’

‘And the English clue?’

‘Mine said ‘the curse is the key’.’

His curses bounced around my head and I couldn’t even react now that the curse had taken hold of me. I was stuck standing here like a statue, barely able to breathe with the force of its restraints.

‘I think we could use his help, Ozzie,’ I cut through his tirade.

‘How? He can’t find out, Junie. We don’t know what will happen.’

‘But what if he figures it out on his own? What if he puts the pieces together without any help?’ I argued.

‘That’s...’ he hesitated, thinking through my words. ‘That might actually work.’

‘I know,’ I agreed. ‘No one’s ever tried to dig deeper before so we don’t know how the curse will react. What we do know is that we can’t tell anyone ourselves. This could be the break we need, Ozzie.’

I felt more than heard his sigh through our bond. ‘ Okay. I trust you. If you trust him...’

‘I do, Oz. I trust him. I don’t know how to explain it, but he’s a part of this somehow. We’re meant to be.’

I giggled at the sound of his gagging, my eyes widening when every eye turned toward me.

A Fae I didn’t recognise stepped from the crowd and stalked toward us, his cold eyes intent on Elvina. She stumbled back a step and Phenex moved to block his path. He leaned around the larger Daemon to spit a nasty sounding question at Elvina, but she merely shook her head.

‘What did he say?’ Phenex asked her.

‘He wants to know about the curse.’

‘Well, tell him he can fuck off. It doesn’t concern him.’

She choked on her breath. ‘I-I... I can’t s-say that,’ she stammered.

He softened his tone so as not to spook her further. ‘Please relay the message, Elvina. It doesn’t have to be word for word.’

She suddenly seemed to find some semblance of a backbone, though, because she didn’t relay the message straight away. Instead, she pinned us with her attention.

‘He has a point. What curse do you speak of?’

‘I have nothing else to say on the matter, now drop it and tell them to as well or you

can go right back to them. I will not have you putting my mate at risk to sate your curiosity,' he said firmly, though not harshly.

She pursed her lips and studied me for a moment before making her decision, and I relaxed infinitesimally when she chose us. Each time she did it seemed to chip away at a piece of her, however, and I wondered how much it cost her to keep turning her back on her people. I didn't think she was. Not really. If anything, I thought she was doing this to help her people, not abandon them.

They hadn't seemed to figure that out, though, and my heart went out to her.

'The topic of curses is closed and has nothing to do with us. You will get nothing more from them,' she told him. He sneered at her, obviously not liking her answer, but he took it for what it was and stomped back to his group.

One by one the Fae dismissed us, giving us their backs as they continued down the tunnel. However, one stayed back for a moment longer, his gaze penetrating as it studied me and Phenex. Evander narrowed his eyes at me, deciding I was the most likely the source of the trouble and sniffed haughtily before spinning on his heel and rejoining his friends.

'Well,' I said, eager to use my mouth as soon as I felt the curse drop its shackles now that no one was asking any questions. 'That was fun.'

'I will figure it out, Beautiful. Now that I know you are being blocked from speaking of it, I will work tirelessly to help you,' he vowed.

I couldn't respond in any way that acknowledged the curse, so I waited for a beat and then gave him a hug.

I believed him, and if anyone could help me and Oz break free, I knew it would be

him, and I was more thankful than ever that I had found him.

Oswald

My mind was spinning with the new information Junie had provided as I thought through all the implications. I'd had my suspicions that the prophecy about us had something to do with these trials, but there was still so much we didn't know even if her theory was correct.

There was only one way I could test her theory, though.

I'd been keeping my distance from everyone since Junie and her new... friend disappeared (I was not going to think about what she had accidentally told me, because gross), and they had been keeping their distance too. Likely because my scowl promised pain and suffering for anyone who got too close. The only one who had dared come anywhere near me was the other purple Daemon. I figured he and the other one were related since they looked so much alike so, since we were sort of in the same boat. A few Daemons tried to get close, but my new brooding buddy scared them away even more than I did, so let him stick around. He was making himself useful.

A few of the Humans tried pulling me away from edges of the room and into their little circle as both groups had taken up clear territory within the rocky chamber. I just hid behind a stalagmite and tried not to let my fear consume me.

I was significantly more relaxed after Junie had contact me though, and Barney Number Two had definitely noticed. I decided to test out Junie's theory on him.

'Hi. I'm Oz,' I told him, extending my hand for him to shake. He eyed me like I was

insane, then my hand like it was about to bite him. Eventually, he copied my motion and slid his hand against mine.

‘Abaddon,’ he replied, giving me his name. It didn’t immediately let me know if he understood my words so much as my actions, however, so I tried again.

‘That other guy, what’s his name?’ I asked, and he jolted back as if I’d tried to slap him in the face.

‘You know the language of the Legion?’ he asked, shock colouring his tone.

‘Nope,’ I said, a grin slowly stretching my cheeks wider. It had worked. ‘But it’s nice to be able to communicate with you. To me, you’re speaking English.’

He gaped at me. ‘How is this possible?’

‘The magic of the Trials, I supposed. It’s in the name, right? The Unity Trials. I guess once we start acting united then little, insignificant things like a language barrier doesn’t mean much.’

‘Insignificant... We’re not even from the same realm,’ he pointed out and I chuckled at his astonishment. It was slightly hysterical, but at the same time it felt good, like a release of the tension.

‘You didn’t answer my question,’ I prompted.

‘What? Oh. Phenex. He’s my little brother.’

‘I’m sure he’s fine,’ I tried to assure him as much as I could with the curse gagging me from being more specific. If I could have told him I knew that for certain I would have.

His amused snort was not the reaction I had expected, however.

‘I’m sure he is. He’s been dreaming about that girl for years now, believe it or not. Fell in love with a figment of his damn imagination. Imagine my shock when he tells me he’s gone and fucking found her.’

I almost choked on my tongue. ‘I’m sorry, what?’

He let out a small noise of agreement. ‘I’m happy for them, don’t get me wrong, but I’m still trying to wrap my head around the fact that Humans are real. And not just Humans.’

I barked out a laugh. ‘Yeah. Tell me about it.’

‘What are you two gossiping about over here?’ the stunning red temptress of a Daemoness that had stood up for Junie asked as she rounded the stalagmite and perched her perky ass against the wall.

Abaddon jerked his head in her direction. ‘Can you understand her too, or is it just me?’

‘I heard her.’

She blinked at me in shock, her long, thick red lashes fluttering seductively with the movement. ‘Well, that’s new. I can understand you, too.’

‘Do you think once you understand one you can understand them all?’ Abaddon asked me.

‘Only one way to find out,’ I said, then moved back to join the others, both Daemons following close behind.

I clapped my hands and whistled sharply to get everyone's attention and the quiet murmurs of conversation died down immediately as all eyes latched onto me. 'Who here can understand me?'

When I received nothing but blank stares from the Daemons and confused mutterings from the Humans, I got my answer. I shared a look with the two Daemons I could communicate with, an understanding passing between us.

'I'll explain things to my people while you go to yours, yeah?'

'Indeed,' Abaddon agreed, though he seemed faraway, lost in his thoughts as he meandered into the throng of his people.

The Daemoness turned to me, eyeing me up and down as she bit her lip in appreciation. I wasn't about to admit that her finding me attractive was the biggest ego boost of the century since I was sure she got that a lot, but I was definitely mapping out in my head how I could see how far that appreciation went. She seemed to catch onto the direction of my thoughts and stepped into my personal space, her fingers reaching up to trace patterns on my forearm.

'I'm Qarinah, by the way.'

I cleared my throat so I wouldn't squeak when I spoke, relieved when my voice came out steady and strong. Manly. 'Yeah, I got that.'

She hummed, the sound sending all the blood rushing from my brain straight to my cock. 'You didn't tell me yours.'

'Huh?'

She smiled knowingly and looked up at me from beneath half-lidded eyes. 'Your

name.

‘Oh, right. I’m Oz.’

‘Short and sweet.’ Her fingertips brushed teasingly against my hard cock through my pants and she leaned in close until I could feel her warmth breath coasting against my ear. ‘I’m glad it’s the only thing that is.’

Fuck me, if I didn’t get away from this woman I was about to embarrass myself.

‘Right,’ I said, stepping away and clearing my throat again. This time, my voice was deeper, hoarser, full of sexual promise. At least I wasn’t squeaking like a little boy. Small blessings.

I pointed my thumb over my shoulder in the general direction of my own people. ‘I should...’

‘Only if you come find me when you’re done,’ she smirked, her full red lips tilting up at one corner before her smooth, pink tongue poked out to lick them.

I didn’t bother saying anything as I tried to make it look like I wasn’t running away. I was, in fact, running away. That woman was Dangerous with a capital D.

Any lust fled my body as soon as I saw who I was inadvertently heading right towards, and I almost turned on my heels and fled. Unfortunately, Kendra saw me coming and shot me a flirtatious smile that had once worked wonders on me. Now, however, I just saw the girl that kept talking shit about my sister because she thought we were fucking.

Seriously, the rumours about me and Junie needed to end because, quite frankly, they were sickening and it was really pissing me off now. When they’d first started I’d

squashed them immediately, mostly for Thorne's sake. Now, I was just annoyed at their persistence, and it was petty bitches like Kendra that kept them alive.

'Ozzie, baby. Come join us,' she simpered. 'We're worried about you.'

'Don't call me that,' I snapped. Junie was the only one allowed to call me that. 'I'm fine. We need to talk, though.'

She lit up like a damn light bulb and I immediately realised my mistake.

'Not just you. All of us,' I corrected, and while she deflated a little it didn't seem to stick. The fact that I was even talking to her right now was probably reinforcing her delusions, so I extracted myself and used the bodies of the others as they gathered to keep a distance between us.

Sex with Kendra was fantastic, but I'd learned the hard way that good sex did not equate to a decent relationship. I was thankful I'd put a stop to that before it had gotten that far, though I still felt a little guilty I'd never told Junie about it. It was a tricky situation, but ultimately it was the curse that had held my tongue, but not for the typical reasons. She had lost so many friends over the years because of it and I didn't want to be the reason she lost another one, even if I did think she was a fake bitch. In hindsight I should have just be upfront and honest, but my intentions had been good.

I shook those thoughts from my head when everyone was gathered in a circle around me, eagerly awaiting whatever it was I had to say. I didn't make them wait any longer and launched into the explanation about the Trials and their purpose, what was needed to communicate with the other races, and how we needed to band together and, wait for it, unite in order to survive the trials.

A few people scoffed, not because they didn't believe me but because they didn't

trust the others. I didn't blame them entirely, but I knew our biggest challenge wasn't going to be sentient trees or underground mazes. It was going to be convincing us all to not only work together but to build trust between us all.

It was hard enough to do that within our own race, let alone with four others. This was not going to be a fun adventure, and I dreaded every moment of it.

I needed Junie back. Her light was what kept my shadows away most days, and without her here now I felt them creeping in, eagerly tearing away any ounce of goodness in my life.

I took solace in the fact that she was close enough for us to communicate through our mind link, though. I had figured out that it was likely a proximity thing, which this most recent interaction had only confirmed for me. Twice now she had been out of range, and I didn't like it. I just wanted her back where I could keep her safe.

Not that she needed me for that. She was one of the most powerful Witches I'd ever met. I had a feeling she was probably one of the most powerful Witches currently in existence. If that got out, which it would eventually if these trials went the way I thought they would, then she was going to need as many people on her side as possible. Real friends who cared about her as a person, not fake friends like Kendra who would only try to use her for one reason or another. It was another reason I needed to break this curse and soon. I needed to be her brother, and I couldn't do that with this damn spell binding and gagging me. I enjoyed a good bit of bondage, but not like that.

After a moment of deliberation between members of each group, I stood back and watched as a few of them tentatively met in the middle of the chamber. Soon, more and more of them were introducing themselves and starting the long, slow process of building that connection I knew the Trials were after.

I was proud of Junie for figuring it out and pleased with the progress being made, but it didn't answer the biggest questions still looming over our heads. First, someone had initiate these trials, but who? And then, most importantly, why?

Abaddon joined me against the wall, kicking a foot up to rest against the rock as we surveyed the results of our announcement. Qarinah was next to take up a spot beside me, earning me a single lifted brow from Abaddon. It shot up higher than mine could go, almost disappearing into his hairline. Impressive.

'That's quite an impact you two have made,' Qarinah commented, her gaze fixed ahead on our tentatively mingling people.

The Shifters finally materialised from where they hid within the tunnel behind us, curious about what was happening between our two races. Their Alpha, the giant snake that I'd caught eyeing up Juniper like a piece of meat he couldn't wait to consume, was the first to slither from the shadows. I couldn't figure out if he wanted to fuck her or kill her, but I had the worst feeling that it was both.

I jerked my chin at him and directed my next question to Qarinah since she was the only one who had witnessed what happened there. 'What's going on with Nagini over there?'

She frowned at me in confusion. 'Nagini?'

'Right. It's a snake from the Harry Potter series. I keep forgetting you wouldn't know what that is.'

'Oh,' she said when she realised what I was asking. 'He made fun of Juniper. She got annoyed with it and put him in his place. It was the best thing I've seen in a long time, but he's been pouting about it ever since. I think she threatened his fragile masculinity and now he's been quietly trying to find a way to build it back up again.'

I sighed in annoyance. Not at Junie, because damn right she should have defended herself, but because of him. He was going to be a problem.

Two glowing yellow eyes found mine from across the room and I found an intelligence there that sent chills down my spine. He was plotting something, I could tell. I just needed to uncover what it was before he hurt my sister, because he wouldn't survive it and that would put a damper on the Trials' objective.

But I could tell from that single glance he was going to be a bigger problem than we could afford.

Juniper

The Fae were starting to get antsy. I couldn't tell what they were saying to each other and Elvina refused to translate so my suspicions grew from multiple angles. That was starting to annoy me. It made me think she had been planted to infiltrate us for the sole purpose of reporting back to them, and the only thing keeping me from booting her right back to them was the fact that we needed to play nice.

I was good at playing nice, even if I wasn't feeling particularly friendly towards the grumpy, pointy-eared beings. I wondered if they were all like that or if we just got stuck with the worst of the bunch.

On that note, I hoped we weren't stuck with the best, because I already wanted to throttle them and if they got worse than this I wasn't going to lose my shit. I was already refraining from punching the perpetual scowls off their perfectly symmetrical faces. I mean, come on. Didn't they scowl so much as children their faces just got stuck that way or something? It wasn't normal.

My feelings toward Elvina changed when their group moved further ahead and she took the opportunity to pull me aside. I could tell straight away by her defeated demeanour that things were not as they seemed.

'I am sorry for my silence, Juniper,' she whispered in my ear, keeping her voice low in case there were any stragglers still listening in. 'They are frustrated because they do not know where they are going and we...'

'You what?' I prompted, wondering why she'd trailed off.

She sighed shakily, wariness and anxiety making her tremble. 'We are the ones who initiated the Unity Trials.'

The world came to a screeching halt. 'What?'

'I am sorry. We had no choice. It was our only hope...' she cut herself off when the others came back into view, shifting from one foot to the other as she kept her head down, shame colouring her cheeks.

I leant in and whispered as quietly as I could, 'Later.'

I patted her arm so she knew I wasn't upset with her and gave her a friendly smile that I hoped assuaged some of her fears. Because there were clearly a lot of them.

Phenex pulled me aside and wrapped me in a hug to cover up what he was about to say. I clung to him as tight as I could, accidentally digging my nails into the bare skin of his back which made him groan, his cock hardening between us where he rubbed it against my stomach.

'That wasn't what I was after,' he murmured in a strained voice.

I giggled. 'Sorry?'

He chuckled. 'Shush, you. I just wanted to check in after... that. It's... a lot to process.'

An angry male voice cut through our whispered words and I looked to Elvina to translate when we came face to face with a red-faced Arden. I wondered where he'd run off to. He must have been hidden within the mass of his people.

'He said to... um...' she started off, unsure if she should repeat what was clearly a

rude comment.

‘Go on. It’s okay. His words don’t mean much to me,’ I told her and Phenex grunted in agreement.

‘He said to break it up, that they won’t save you if they’re fighting for their lives and you’re... um... fucking.’

I hummed, amused that he was so easy to rile up just because we weren’t ashamed to be open with our affection for one another. ‘Well, that was kind of him.’

She giggled, the sound like tinkling bells (and now I understood where the name Tinkerbelle came from) which filled me with a sudden affection for her. She was like a stray cat that I wanted to nurse back to health with her constant wounded demeanour, and that first sound of happiness coming from her was like the best reward for a job well done. It meant she was opening up, even just a little, and I decided in that moment that I was going to make sure she made it through these trials.

Arden threw another slew of vitriol at us that I was sure I could decode from his body language alone, but Elvina translated for us again anyway.

‘He said... I’m so sorry, but he said you’re a disgrace to your people and your public displays of affection are revolting, that you shouldn’t even be attracted to each other because you’re not of the same race. He... No. I don’t want to say that. He’s wrong. You two are a beautiful couple and you shouldn’t listen to people like him. He’s just jealous because no woman would ever want to be with someone who constantly belittles them to compensate for his miniscule penis.’

Her commentary shocked a laugh right out of me, and Phenex quickly followed with his own show of mirth. ‘There’s clearly a story there, and you should tell me sometime,’ I teased her with a wink.

She huffed but a small smile played at her lips to let me know she wasn't mad. At me at least. In a rare show of confidence brought on by her blatant disgust with the man, she shooed Arden back to the group of Fae that were (unsuccessfully) hiding their own amusement behind their hands.

As I watched the Arden Show unfold, I caught Evander's eye. He was glancing between me and Phenex with an open curiosity that he quickly shut down when he saw me looking, but it didn't change the fact that I caught it. I wasn't sure what their problem was or why they had initiated the Unity Trials in the first place, but there was a deep-seeded prejudice embedded within the Fae that was preventing them from seeing things clearly. Perhaps they had stories about Humans the way we did about Daemons, villainising us so they came into every interaction expecting the worst.

But hadn't I proved already that wasn't the case?

If we were going to get along enough to work together to get through these trials that they had thrust upon us , then there was a lot of work to do to get to that point.

I let my resentment win for a moment and pulled a face at their backs, annoyed that they had called upon us for help only to spurn in rather than accept it, and we were making all the progress that they were blatantly ignoring. I had met some pretty darned arrogant people in my life, but these guys took the cake.

The sound of wings beating echoed down the tunnel like the gods were laughing at me. I had spoken too soon. I'd almost forgotten about the angels, but I wasn't going to get the chance to do so again if we were about to cross paths. Although, I was curious how they were able to fly in these narrow tunnels. We barely had enough room for two people to walk side by side let alone accommodate their large wingspans.

So if they weren't about to fly in the tunnels, that meant we were converging on a

larger chamber like the one we'd arrive in.

Or the one Oz and Phenex had dropped on top of us in.

‘Oz?’ I called out to my twin.

‘Yeah, Junie?’ he replied, his voice in my head louder than before which likely meant he was closer.

Tentative hope flickered to life inside of me as I asked the question. ‘Did the angels show up?’

His groan told me all I needed to know and wide grin spread across my cheeks from ear to ear. ‘Yeah,’ he confirmed. ‘Friends of yours?’

‘If by ‘friends’ you mean ‘arrogant bird people I want to pluck like a chicken’ then sure.’

The sound of his laughter bounced around my skull and warmed me from the inside out. ‘You’re close, aren’t you?’

‘Yup. Just around the corner, I think. We can hear their wings.’

‘I’d rather they stayed up there than come back down here. They’re acting like they’re our gods-damned saviours or something while simultaneously sneering down their noses at us and pretending they aren’t.’

‘Is their leader still alive?’

‘Blonde hair, blue eyes, muscles upon muscles and a permanent smirk that’s begging to get punched right off his smug fucking face?’

‘That’s the one.’

‘Unfortunately.’

‘He fucked up our way out.’

‘Can I kill him?’

‘In your head, sure.’

He sighed. ‘Not good enough. His wings are too white. They could do with a bit of colour.’

‘Be nice,’ I chided, though I didn’t exactly disagree. I wouldn’t wish death on anyone, but I couldn’t say I’d cry if that guy didn’t make it.

A pinch on my ass made me yelp and I turned a scathing glare on Phenex. He put on an air of false innocence and bit his lip, and I giggled when I heard an aggravated huff from somewhere within the group of Fae. Probably Arden. Well, tough shit.

I lifted my hand to return the favour but Phenex blocked me, grabbing my hand to intertwine our fingers which he then brought up to his lips to kiss. I swooned.

‘What’s going on inside that pretty little head of yours?’ he asked.

‘How much I want to strip you naked and fuck you senseless,’ I answered honestly.

He wasn’t the only one that choked. A quick side glance at Elvina showed her entire upper body was flushed a deep crimson that exacerbated her pale features.

‘Don’t tease me, Beautiful. I’d love nothing less than to make your thoughts a reality,

but now isn't the time,' he groaned out, but despite his words his free hand stroked down my back to hold onto my ass. I wiggled it then pulled away to avoid creating a show for my brother and the others. It may not have seemed like it but I did have limits.

I was grateful for my forethought because that was when the tunnel curved and widened until it spat us out inside the familiar chamber. Phenex pulled me closer while Elvina hid behind us as we snuck in behind the Fae, their welcome not so welcoming as their wielded their blades against the group we'd left behind.

'Hey, Junie. Thank fuck you're back,' Oz said and I realised with a start that he was propped up against the wall beside the opening of the tunnel, Qarinah on his right while a purple Daemon that looked remarkably like Phenex stood closest to us. He straightened when he noticed us and bounded over in one large step to wrap Phenex in a bear hug that he returned full force.

'Don't do that again, little brother. I was worried I'd lost you,' he said to Phenex and I smiled when I realised why I could understand him.

'Made a friend, did you?' I asked Oz and he smiled in response. It was tight, but it still met his eyes and that was enough to soothe any anxiety I felt about walking in hand-in-hand with Phenex.

'So... You and the Daemon, huh?'

'You'll like him, I promise.'

'Of course you wouldn't pick a Warlock,' he said with a small shake of his head, imperceptible unless you were looking.

'Hey, that's not true. It's just that the Warlock I picked didn't pick me back,' I

reminded him, but the way his face fell made me frown. I didn't want to make him uncomfortable by pursing his best friend which was why I hadn't tried harder with Hawthorne. If I was wrong, I wondered why he didn't tell me.

But then his gaze drifted to Phenex and he shocked me when he smiled. Maybe I was just overthinking things.

‘He seems cool so far. As long as he stays that way,’ he warned.

‘You like him, don't lie.’

‘For now.’

Qarinah interrupted our internal conversation by wrapping her arms around me in a hug much like Phenex and his brother's. ‘Glad to see you made it back in one piece,’ she told me. Her friendly gesture surprised me, but I was a tactile person as well so I had no problem hugging her back. Until I remembered her reaction to Phenex kissing me.

‘Um... I didn't steal your boyfriend, did I?’ I blurted and she pulled back with a sigh.

‘No. Phenex and I have never been together despite my many attempts to lure him into my bed,’ she admitted and my jealousy flared at the thought of them together in any way before me.

‘Qarinah is a succubus, Beautiful. She feeds on sex,’ Phenex informed me while resting an arm over my shoulder in a clear display of possession. I followed suit, my own arm snaking around his middle as I staked my claim right back.

‘Look at these two, already declaring their mating,’ the brother teased as he came to a stop in front of me. ‘I'm Abaddon, this one's older brother. It's nice to finally meet

you, Juniper.'

My eyebrows rose at his choice of words. 'Finally?'

Phenex coughed to interrupt whatever Abaddon was going to say, and I shot him an expectant look. 'I'll tell you later. Don shouldn't be the one to tell you anyway.'

'Oh...'

'It's nothing bad, sis. He's been dreaming about you for years, apparently,' Oz told me. He must have noted my dejected feelings despite my efforts to hide them, and I had to fight not to react.

'I don't even know what to say to that,' I responded, completely taken aback by the news.

'Nothing. I just couldn't stand seeing your light dim when he wouldn't answer. He isn't keeping it a secret from you, he probably just wants to have that conversation in private.'

'Thank you.'

'Any time. Fair warning, though, the man's already in love with you and has been for years. I don't think he's willing to let you go now that he knows you're more than just a figment of his imagination.'

I couldn't stop my pleased smile if I'd tried. 'Yeah, well, the feeling's mutual.'

'You really love him after a day?' he asked, stunned but serious.

'Well, I'm getting there. I don't think I'm ready for any marriage proposals or

anything. I know things are moving fast between us but not that fast. I might not know much about him, but I know his soul. He's a good man, Oz. I honestly can't fathom letting him go now, either.'

'As long as you're happy, Junie, I'm happy for you.'

'Thanks, Ozzie. Love you.'

'Love you, too.'

'So that's why you've been zoning out,' Phenex said. 'You two can mind-speak.'

Oz and I both blinked at Phenex, shocked to our cores. Neither of us could say anything out loud, but we were both screaming inside our heads for him to put the clues together and figure it out.

'You're both a part of the mysterious curse. And you're what, cousins? Siblings?'

My heartbeat was echoing through my ears so loudly I could barely hear anything. He was so, so close.

'Right, sorry. I forgot you can't talk about it. Don't worry, though. I'll figure it out,' he promised, sending both of us a reassuring smile.

Oz and I exchanged a glance that said more than any words ever could. Phenex was giving us hope we never thought we'd have. This could actually work. We might actually be on our way to breaking our curse.

Rakshasa

I could scent her before she even stepped through the opening and entered the throng of people. The problem was that I could also scent him. The Daemon bastard that thought he could steal my mate away from me before I had the chance to test her true strength, to determine her worthiness.

His scent was all over her, and hers all over him.

I wanted to tear the skin from their bodies to remove it. Until proven otherwise, the little Witch was mine.

I continued watching from the shadows, though I was unable to hear anything they said over the ruckus of the room. The low din of voices had risen with the Humans and the Daemons beginning to mingle, and with the heavy beat of dozens of wings from the angles hovering above us the noise turned chaotic quickly.

A few of my Clan retreated, their animals more solitary and were repelled by the bustling activity of so many supernatural races forced together. Even more concerning was that we had believed them to have died out a long time ago, the stories our elders told of them passed down from generations and more fantastical than realistic. I had been running through all the ones I could remember in my head while studying them, gathering information I could use for our benefit.

The Daemons were ruled by their curiosity. Clearly social creatures, they were wary of the rest of us and protective of themselves, yet it didn't escape my notice how they continued to glance in our direction, and the Human's, and now the Angels' as if they

were holding themselves back.

The Angels seemed to be elevating themselves above us in a physical representation of how they viewed themselves. It would be interesting to see how they fared on the ground, but there were many within my clan with wings, so their self-righteousness was more of a hindrance to them than anything else. It would be a lesson they learned the hard way, likely with many of their ranks dead at our feet, but I had been brainstorming ways to ally with them.

Lastly, the Humans were the most varied in their reactions. Some, like my little Witch, were more curious and intrigued than others that seemed to want nothing to do with any of us. There were even more who resided somewhere in the middle, intrigued but with too much self-preservation to do anything about it.

It wasn't until the Warlock and Daemon that had gravitate toward one another had made a little speech to their respective groups that the mingling had even started. Somehow, though I was completely baffled how they had accomplished it, they were communicating with each other. Their languages were vastly different, the Human's with softer, rounder words compared to the Daemon's harsher grunting and growling. Yet, despite speaking completely different languages they understood each other.

It must have been some sort of spell cast by the Humans, though how I had missed the casting of such a powerful magic I couldn't say. It must have been incredibly subtle to have escaped my notice.

I was also pissed off that they hadn't included my people in their spell, the exclusion a blatant slight I would not let go unpunished.

Arcturus's feet came to stand beside my head, though he was careful not to step on me. It would have ended in a very painful death if he had. I didn't use my venom often on my own clansmen, but I had been known to when necessary. I typically

preferred asphyxiating my prey. There was something about watching my kills gasp for breath at the mercy of my strength that activated my most basic, primal instincts. Eat, sleep, fuck. Those were my main pleasures in life, and hunting aroused all three. And currently, all three were being threatened.

I narrowed my eyes on the way the Daemon curled himself around what was mine , the protective action heating my blood and sending my mind into a tailspin. I didn't even want the puny Human, not really. She was small and no matter how many vines she could throw from her fingertips she was still weak, and she looked more like a child than a woman. There was no muscle to her, just stick thin limbs swamped by oversized clothing. She was nothing like the woman of my people. Shifter women were tall, muscular, aggressive, and feral, the complete opposite to her.

And yet, my body reacted to hers like none other. My cocks were in a constant state of arousal, alternating between half hard and full mast, and I was disgusted with myself for it. I was an Alpha, not a child molester. Her little tantrum had proved her childishness in ways I would never live down.

I had to sever this bond before it solidified irreversibly.

‘ What’s the plan, Alpha?’ Arcturus asked and I could feel the way he vibrated with untapped energy beside me.

‘ Continue to study them. Report back their strengths and weaknesses but focus on the Witch and her friends. The boy, the Daemons, anyone close to her. We will need to strip her of her allies so she has nothing and no one left to protect her.’

‘We will make her pay, Alpha. She won't get away with this.’

The rest of the clan bristled, their agreement shooting through the mind link on the curtails of their restlessness. A few of the females were eagerly awaiting the chance

to Challenge my little Witch, and soon I would let them.

Soon, we would show them all just how weak she truly was and I would crush her. Then my place as Alpha would be indisputable and all the races would bow down to my superiority. They would quake with fear at the mere whisper of my name, and no one would dare attempt to tame me again.

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 4:07 am

Juniper

‘The Shifters are going to be a problem,’ I told the group as we settled in a circle on the floor against the wall.

‘I can feel their aggressive energy all the way from over here,’ Phenex agreed.

‘I can hear them,’ I admitted.

They all blinked at me in surprise, a few jaws dropping from the news.

‘Hear them how?’ Oz asked in my head, unable to respond to me directly out loud with the others around.

‘I don’t hear anything from them,’ Qarinah argued, missing my point.

‘In my head. I can hear them talking about us. About me.’

‘What the fuck?’ Abaddon breathed. ‘You’ve tapped into their mind link?’

I hummed thoughtfully, unsure how to describe what I was experiencing. ‘No... I don’t think so. At least not all of them. It’s the snake guy, the one I smacked around a bit with my vines. I can hear what he’s saying and it’s not great.’

‘What is he saying?’ Phenex asked, hugging me tighter to his chest from my perch on his lap.

‘I guess I humiliated him in front of his buddies and now he wants revenge. Oh, and something along the lines of me being his unwanted mate because I’m too small, weak and childish.’

Phenex released an epic growl from deep within his chest, the sound heading straight for my clit which vibrated in response. Fuck, I loved it when he got all possessive and growly.

‘ Why the fuck does he think you’re his mate?’ Oz snarled inside my mind. ‘ And why the fuck does he think you’re not a worthy mate? He’d be lucky to have you!’

I sent a smirk his way which made him roll his eyes. ‘ Damn straight he would. I don’t know, I guess my height and childish features are a turn off or something. He keeps comparing me to the Shifter women and I get it. I’m the complete opposite.’

‘You’re stronger than they think, and he’s stupid to keep underestimating you when you’ve already beat him up.’

I shrugged. There wasn’t really anything more to add to it. He was just a toxic piece of shit with a fragile sense of masculinity and it wasn’t my job to stroke his overgrown ego.

‘Isn’t he their leader, though?’ Qarinah asked, her gaze pinned on the shadows of the tunnel where they hid.

‘The term they use is Alpha, but yeah,’ I confirmed.

‘Then how are we supposed to make the connection with them if they’re so intent on hurting you for putting that asshole in his place?’ she asked, worry colouring her tone.

‘Not just them, either,’ Oz jumped in, able to speak up now that it was Qarinah asking the question and not me. ‘We’ve still got to find a way to bridge the gap with the Fae and the Angels, too, and all three seem pretty insufferable to me so far.’

‘I take offense to that,’ Elvina spoke up for the first time from her position almost on the outside of the circle. It was like she’d been edging away because she didn’t want to be associated with us, but I knew better. Her shyness could have been mistaken as haughtiness if you didn’t already know she was shy, but our brief time together had proven to us that she was serious about this.

I felt a twinge of guilt over my suspicions that she was a spy. With the way her own people were glaring at her even now, it was clear her decision was an independent one, and they hadn’t agreed with it.

‘Actually, he has a point,’ I pointed out. ‘Now’s as good a time as any to talk about what you were trying to tell me earlier, Elvina. Why don’t you elaborate?’

She cast a nervous glance toward her people that were huddled on the opposite side of the chamber. It hadn’t escaped my notice that they chose to position themselves closer to the Shifters than the rest of us, or how the Angels were hovering above us like they thought us too far beneath them to sully themselves by being near us.

The segregation was the exact opposite of what we needed, what the Unity Trials were about, and their stubbornness was going to be the biggest Trial of all to overcome. I was exhausted just thinking about it.

‘I am not comfortable speaking of it when I can be so easily overheard...’ she protested, and Oz and I shared a look of understanding.

‘Silencing bubble?’ I asked him.

‘It would look suspicious if we didn’t include the others,’ he pointed out, and he was right.

I held Elvina’s gaze with my own, for once no levity shining through. This was a serious discussion and deserved a serious response.

‘We can create a silencing bubble around those of us partaking in the conversation. Anyone outside of it won’t be able to hear a thing.’

Oz took over, and I enjoyed hearing his voice with others around. ‘If we perform the spell it will be obvious and it could be detrimental to our attempts of garnering trust if we don’t include the others.’

‘What others?’ she squeaked.

‘Just those who have already made the effort to connect with other races. This is information we all need whether your people like it or not.’

‘What’s going on?’ Abaddon asked, frowning in frustration that he wasn’t clued into what we were talking about.

Elvina took one look at him, the rest of our circle, and then the others that were still mingling in the centre of the room and sighed. ‘Okay.’

I nodded for Oz to grab everyone else and soon enough we were completely surrounded. We had also caught the attention of the Fae, Shifters and Angels so we were going to need to move things along.

‘Witches and Warlocks, prepare to create a silencing bubble,’ Oz called out and we all got into position. With so many of us to encompass in our spell we needed more people to boost its power. We encircled our group and held hands to keep them inside

and began our chant.

‘Obsecro ut in silentio. Nemo alius audiat. Bulla silentii crea obstruere inutiles aures.

Obsecro ut in silentio. Nemo alius audiat. Bulla silentii crea obstruere inutiles aures.

Obsecro ut in silentio. Nemo alius audiat. Bulla silentii crea obstruere inutiles aures.

Ita fiat.’

With the last words, so let it be done , a shimmering dome spread from out arms to encase us all in an opaque bubble that blurred us as well as kept in the sound. No one could read lips or even discern who was speaking, our conversation thoroughly private.

All Humans remained connected in our circle to maintain the spell for it took only one person to break the connection that amplified our magic, the Daemons trapped in our core until the spell dispersed. Except the silence we had created beyond the dome seemed to have gotten stuck inside it as well. No one spoke. Instead, jaws gaped open as the Daemons (and Elvina) struggled to decide which was more appropriate to gawp at, us or the magic.

‘Go on, Elvina,’ I prompted. ‘We won’t be able to hold it forever.’

She physically shook herself out of her stupor and all eyes were suddenly wrenched away from us and the dome and focused intently on her. She squirmed under the attention but a reassuring smile from me and a scattering of others seemed to help her find her tongue.

‘Um... I’m not sure... Can everyone understand me?’ she asked and I wanted to face palm at the oversight. We might have been able to understand each other but she

hadn't been involved in the mass effort to create the connection between our races. Instead, she'd stuck by our side and steered clear of the crowds.

Luckily, they all confirmed that they could, in fact, understand her and I was relieved that the connection didn't need to be made on an individual basis. It seemed our intent was what mattered the most here, and I was grateful that the magic of the Trials recognised that.

'Okay. Good. Well... I don't know where to start...' she stumbled over her words.

'From the beginning is probably best,' Phenex urged.

'Tell them what you told us,' I added on.

She inhaled a composing breath, hesitated only a moment longer, and then launched into her story. 'We Fae are the ones who initiated the Unity Trials, and before you ask, I'll explain why. You see, there's a terrible darkness plaguing my people. It infects us, turns us into mindless monsters, nothing more than murderous beasts that stop at nothing until they have destroyed everything in their path. Even then, the horrors never cease. There is no cure. The only way to stop them is to kill them, and we are dying. Our numbers are dwindling. Our people are going extinct.'

'Where did this darkness come from?' someone asked, though I couldn't tell who. It wasn't someone I recognised.

Elvina's already grim expression darkened even further, her lips tilting downward. 'There are forbidden texts. Old tomes filled with terrible knowledge. A small group of rebels read them centuries ago and released a curse upon our people. Recently, someone else had been studying those tomes in secret, trying to find a cure. Something. Anything we could use to fight back against the evil that has destroyed us.'

‘That was where he read about the Unity Trials. At first, he was condemned for breaking our sacred laws, for reading the words long since forbidden to us all. No one wanted to listen, but we no longer had a choice. Our Council tracked him down and asked what needed to be done.

‘An assembly was held within our realm. Each of us was called to attend from every corner of our lands and we were informed of the Trials. We voted... We did not understand... The Old Texts spoke of uniting the five magics, and we assumed they were referring to our own. We could not have possibly fathomed...’

‘That five magics was the five supernatural races and we weren’t just stuff of myths and legends?’ I surmised, keeping my tone light and teasing when I saw her floundering beneath her guilt. Now that I’d heard her side of the story, I understood the action they had taken. I fully believed we all would have chosen the same way if it were us, and the lack of condemnation she was receiving from this particular crowd was proof enough of that. The occasional mutterings of a select few individuals who were put out by the whole situation was inevitable, but that was a personal problem for them to work through themselves.

The truth of the matter was that the Fae needed help, and they were going to need to start asking for it nicely or else this would all be for naught.

The spell burst when I was bowled over from behind, the connection breaking as I stumbled forward. Luckily, Phenex caught me before I face-planted into the rock below. I would have undoubtedly ended up with a broken nose at least and a concussion at worst.

He snarled at the cause of my fall, thrusting me behind him as he took up a defensive position in front of me. His daggers were raised in his hands before I even knew what was happening.

Oz stepped up beside him, a spell already on his lips. ‘ Enervo!’

The spell slammed into none other than the Shifter’s Alpha with a force even I winced at. I watched on in pity as the asshole crumpled to the ground, unable to move as the spell seeped him of his energy. Before long, he fell unconscious, his body shutting down to reserve what little strength he had left. It was a nasty spell but effective against an enemy in a pinch. It wasn’t something I liked to use, nor had I had any reason to use it myself, but I was grateful for Oz’s quick thinking.

Unfortunately, it only seemed to insense the Shifter, all of them Shifting into their second forms within moments in a grotesque display of bending, cracking, shrinking and elongating. I was suddenly very glad to have been born a Witch so I would never be forced to experience that. It looked beyond painful, and I grudgingly respected them for it.

But I didn’t have time to dwell on the intricacies of what it took to be a Shifter because they were charging at us en mass. As if of the same mind, we reconnected our circle and I shouted out the last defensive spell I had used, only this time with the assistance of additional magic at my disposal.

‘ Integumentum!’

The spell snapped into place like a rubber band, smacking against us all with a force that knocked the breath from our lungs. It stung like a bitch, too, but at least we were saved from fang and claw when they slashed down on us, their fury driving them to kill.

‘Shit, what do we do?’ the person beside me asked, and I realised for the first time that it was George. I had been far too lost in my own little world to pay attention to my surroundings. I was focused on Oz and Phenex, the Shifter’s growing unease and Elvina’s revelations.

Okay, so there was a lot going on. I should really give myself a break, but it was hard not to feel guilty that I hadn't even noticed someone I'd once considered a close friend, even if now the 'close' part was no longer relevant.

'Wait it out, I suppose,' I said, unsure of what else we could do.

The Fae were momentarily stunned by the sudden display of aggression, but they didn't seem to care enough to aid us even when they snapped out of it. And the Angels... well, they were watching from above as if we were their own personal soap opera. No help from them either, I supposed. It was Humans and Daemons against the world, it seemed, but at least we had them.

I was even more glad for it when Qarinah stepped out from within the crowd and sauntered up to the biggest of them all, a large polar bear currently baring its teeth at Oz in frustration and rage. He immediately back down, however, when she sent out a wave of pure lust, her voice like smooth sin caressing the deepest parts of your soul.

More Succubae, and a few males I was now sure were Incubi, followed her lead and calmed the raging Shifters in record speed. They were still antsy, but their focus was diverted into something a little more... unpleasant to watch.

Females spread themselves before the Daemons, presenting themselves for sex while penises of all shapes and sizes popped out of fur, feathers and scales. There was even the corkscrewed length of a duck that came close to smacking me in the ankle as the small creature waddled on by, eager to get to the source of the sexual energy.

The Shifters weren't the only ones affected, either. Men and women alike from all the races were drawn in like moths to a flame, but though I felt the magic wash over me like a tender caress, I didn't feel the urge to join them. The spell broke as Humans joined the fray, all five races converging on Qarinah and her kin. Phenex and I were one of the only ones left behind, and it was clear why when I saw the others were also

couples.

‘We are Fated, and we have accepted one another. Our claim on each other’s souls keeps us safe from magic that would have us stray,’ Phenex informed me, his lips brushing against my ear and encouraging the lust we were experiencing.

‘Or it just makes us want each other more,’ I noted, sliding my hand back to grasp his hard length and squeeze.

His breath shuddered out of him on a barely tamed sigh. ‘You might be correct.’

‘The tunnel?’ I asked, already leading him by the cock to the dark, sort of secluded spot away from the others. I did not want to see what was going on there, especially considering my twin brother was involved.

No, I wanted to take my man to a shadowy corner and have my way with him.

Except he turned the tables on me and took charge as soon as we were far enough inside the darkness to enjoy the illusion of privacy, slamming my back against the wall and crowding into my space. He smacked my hand away from his cock to grind it into my stomach, but then he shocked me even further by dropping to his knees at my feet.

‘I didn’t get to worship you before. I owe you an orgasm, Beautiful.’

‘Oh, yes please,’ I agreed eagerly, my voice breathy from my lust.

He chuckled low in his throat as his focus zeroed in on my pants. Tauntingly slowly he rolled down my waistband, gradually revealing myself to him as he had grabbed my panties at the same time. Soon, cool air rushed over my bared pussy, the sudden shift in temperature working me up even more as I eagerly awaited his mouth where I

wanted it the most.

He didn't leave me waiting for long. His eyelids drooped at the sight, his pupils expanding until there was no hint of purple of his irises to be seen. And then I could no longer see him because his face was buried between my legs, his tongue licking a long line from my opening up to my clit.

'Fuck, Beautiful. Your cream tastes like the sweetest ambrosia,' he groaned, then dove in for another taste.

I cried out as his tongue circled my sensitive nub, shockwaves of pleasure rolling through my body each time he flicked it at just the right angle. 'Yes, right there. Oh, gods, Phenex... Don't stop.'

He listened. Picking up the pace, he swirled his tongue around my clit again while he rubbed a single long finger through my juices, lubing it up so he wouldn't hurt me when he inserted it. The consideration was sexy as hell and something I had never experienced before. I had only had two sexual partners before him and both had gone full speed ahead without any enthusiasm for foreplay or my own pleasure.

Phenex was making sure I only experienced pleasure, but I found I still craved that pinch of pain.

'Bite it,' I ordered him, my voice husky and low. 'Bite my clit, baby. I need it rough.'

He complied. As soon as his teeth scraped over my most sensitive part I shivered in anticipation, and when he bit down my legs shook with the force of my incoming orgasm. He chose that moment to fill me with his finger, crooking it at just the right angle to make me come apart at the seams, but I didn't let myself just yet. I wasn't ready for it to end.

‘More. Please, baby, give me more.’

Another finger entered me and I scrambled to hold onto something so I wouldn’t collapse, my legs shaking so hard I could not longer hold myself up properly. They moved forward to grip onto his hair, only they knocked against his horns. When my fingers wrapped around them to both hold myself up and keep him in place he released a low, rumbling moan that vibrated my clit and I fought not to give into the impending release.

Not yet. Just a little longer...

My hips had a mind of their own as I rode his face, searching for more friction. I was so close, teetering on the precipice of what I knew was going to be the best orgasm of my life. When he added a third finger and twisted his hand, gripped my clit lightly with his teeth and then sucked , I came apart.

My mouth opened on a silent scream, by breath catching in my throat as wave after wave of pure ecstasy coursed through me. My vision went white as my entire body felt effects. When I eventually came down from the high I was trembling, still gripping Phenex’s horns and holding his face to my pussy. Seeing him look up at me from that position, blown pupils gazing up through thick purple lashes, it was enough to send me into another smaller, yet no less earth shattering orgasm.

‘You are the most stunning creature I have ever met,’ he whispered into my lower lips and giggled breathlessly.

‘See? They need words of affirmation, too.’

‘So it would seem,’ he smirked as I finally relaxed my hold on his horns. ‘I shall endeavour to praise your cunt as often as possible.’

I snorted, the sound entirely unattractive but I couldn't bring myself to care in my fully sated state. 'Go right ahead.'

He helped me adjust my clothing back into place before holding me up to rejoin the group in the larger chamber, but we both stopped short when we found our way blocked. Not by one, but two men I would never have expected to watch me get it on with my man in a dark corner.

Evander stood closest, his eyes boring into mine with an intensity I couldn't decipher. His pants were tented (and what a tent it was...), and he adjusted himself before turning and walking away without another glance back. I hadn't missed the range over emotions in his heavy-lidded gaze, however, I just didn't know what to make of them.

The second man came into view then, and he was hard to miss. The Angel that had stolen our way out with his arrogance and entitlement, not to mention his lack of stealth, was watching everything play out with a curiosity that bordered on ridiculous. He looked like he'd never seen two people have sex before, and I suddenly wondered if he was a virgin. No, I highly doubted that. His cock was basically on full display as it stood at attention, his thin loincloth doing absolutely nothing to keep him covered. I looked away, not wanting to see another man's cock after I'd just fucked my boyfriend's mouth and fingers, and he frowned as if annoyed I wasn't taking the bait and falling over myself to have a taste of him.

Yeah, well, good luck with that, buddy. I was more than happy with my Daemon.

An image flashed in the forefront of my mind of Hawthorne, my heart clenching with both guilt and frustration, the former because my feelings for him were still very much present and I felt like I was being disloyal and the latter because I had no reason to feel that way. Hawthorne barely even knew I existed, let alone reciprocated my feelings. I wasn't cheating on anybody, and it was past time I let my silly little

crush on him go.

I could still look, and I probably would because that man was F.I.N.E., but I wasn't about to sabotage the good thing I had going with Phenex over an unrequited crush.

The angel spread his wings and with a few heavy beats was once again airborne. Without his large frame blocking the way I could see that the impromptu orgy was over. People were redressing, many were avoiding eye contact, and the Shifter had slunk back into their own dark tunnel to continue their lurking in the shadows. I noticed that their Alpha was back to normal, though I only caught the glint of his onyx scales as he slithered away, a brief flash of glowing yellow eyes, and then he was gone.

‘Are you okay, Beautiful?’ Phenex asked, noticing the tension returning to me.

I smiled up at him, letting go of all the bullshit and focusing on the good. ‘Never better. You?’

His hand cupped my cheek and I nuzzled into it, enjoying the affection. ‘With you, my soul soars.’

My breath hitched at his poetic words. ‘No one’s ever said anything like that to me before,’ I admitted, blinking away the sudden moisture in my eyes.

‘A travesty I will be correcting,’ he vowed.

I covered his hand that was still cupping my face with my own. ‘I’m so happy I met you, Phenex.’

His answering smile may have been small but it was bright enough to light an entire city. ‘And I, you.’

Juniper

I threw my head back a little too hard and winced when it bounced off the rock wall behind me. My groan was from both the pain and what my magic had just informed me after I'd sent it out to scan the tunnels once again. I had been keeping an eye out for any signs of more of those creatures and so far we had been lucky.

Now, however, they were converging on us from all directions.

We couldn't even get a real break before we needed to suit up for another battle, it seemed, because we were going to need to fight our way out of this one. I just hoped we could all work together because I didn't think we'd have a choice.

'Incoming!' I shouted, grabbing the attention of the people closest to me. Not good enough. 'We've got company on the way with bigger teeth and claws, people! And I'm pretty sure they breathe fire, too!' I tried again, this time gaining enough traction that those who hadn't heard me were quickly filled in by their friends and groups began to form. I was pleased when I realised they were mixed with both Humans and Daemons and that at least one in each group had a weapon.

I looked up to where the Angels were still hovering above us and waved at them, but they simply looked back with blank stares. I couldn't tell if they came from a lack of understanding of it they simply didn't care about what happened to us. I had a feeling it was both, and my frustration with them grew.

Fine. If they wanted to learn the hard way, then they could suffer the damn consequences.

The Fae thankfully mobilised when they saw the sudden buzz of activity, the air thick with trepidation. It was the Shifters that were going to cause the most problems, but we couldn't leave them to face that fate alone. At the very least we needed to find some way to warn them.

'What's coming, Beautiful? What did you see?' Phenex asked from his permanent position glued to my side, Abaddon and Oz not far behind.

'I don't know. I can only map out the obstacles I find unattached to the Earth as vague shapes so I can't tell what they are, but I detected a few dozen larger masses that were moving rapidly in our direction from each of the tunnels,' I told them. 'The rest is just a gut feeling that they aren't looking for tea and some gossip.'

'The Shifters...' he trailed off.

'I know we're not exactly singing each other's praises, but we can't let them be ambushed without warning, except I don't know how to warn them. I don't think they're particularly open to listening,' I voiced my concerns.

'We go together, then,' Qarinah suggested and I realised for the first time that she had been hidden behind Oz.

A sudden thought struck me. 'Hey, do you think your sexy juju would work on-'

'It only works on people,' she cut me off. 'I'm sorry, but I won't be able to tame that kind of beast.'

I sighed. 'Right. Oh, well. I guess we just try?'

'How close are they?' Abaddon asked, his face a mask of determination.

‘Not far. We should be able to hear them soon.’

‘Then we must hurry. If they do not listen then they will be the ones to suffer the consequences. We will do what we can, the rest is up to them.’

‘When did you become so wise, brother?’ Phenex teased him with an elbow nudge to his side.

Abaddon sniffed. ‘I’ve always been wise, little brother, you’ve just never removed your nose from those books of yours long enough to notice,’ he ribbed right back.

I filed that little morsel of information about my man away for later use and tried to ignore the pang in my chest their brotherly banter caused as I wished I could do the same with Oz more openly. It helped that we now had our mind link, but I knew it wouldn’t be enough to stop this ache until we could be free with our relationship.

As we headed to the tunnel the Shifters had claimed as their own my gaze snagged on George where he was in a group with Kendra and three Daemon. I’d thought once upon a time that we would be friends for life, but my inability to speak about Ozzie had driven a wedge between us I had once wished I could remove. Now, I saw it as a blessing in disguise. Hawthorne and Enid were still friends with Ozzie even though he couldn’t talk about me. They didn’t let that come between them. This curse had at least shown me who was my true friend, and it wasn’t its fault that I apparently hadn’t had any.

And I would never regret choosing Oz all those years ago. He was all the friend I needed, but with Phenex now in the picture that gaping hole in my chest was starting to be filled. Abaddon came with him, the brothers a packaged deal and I was excited to nurture a friendship with him.

And then there was Qarinah. She had given me a taste of what a real friendship

looked like, without judgement or letting silly things like boys or curses get between us. In the brief time I had known her I had already come to trust her.

Perhaps I wasn't doomed to be alone forever after all.

With those thoughts removing a weight from my shoulders I hadn't realised was so heavy, I approached the Shifters with a smile I hoped came across as friendly. It was only when a feline Shifter hissed at me did I realise they would likely assume it was fake. They didn't trust me and they hadn't given me a reason to give them my smiles so why would they believe it genuine?

I shot the others a sheepish look and schooled my features into something a little more serious, but I still couldn't manage to completely wipe my happiness from my face. Besides, I wasn't about to let these asshole make me feel bad for feeling good. They could just get over themselves.

When we stopped a nonthreatening distance from the tunnel, Oz asked the question we were all thinking. 'So... how are we going to do this?'

'Act it out?' I suggested.

'Act out what? Fighting? They'll just think just think we're challenging them ,' Abaddon pointed out, and he wasn't wrong.'

'I was thinking more along the lines of the beasts,' I pouted, curling my hands into an impression of claws and baring my teeth at him.

'And they were take offense thinking we were mocking them.'

'Okay, then, Einstein. You got a better idea?' I snapped.

‘Nope.’

I released a noise of frustration and bit my lip as I thought of the best way to communicate with the last people who wanted us to communicate with them.

I got nothing, so I just pointed at the tunnel behind them then waved them over and hoped they got the gist.

The only response I received were dozens of glowing eyes of assorted colours blinking at me blankly.

All five of us motioned again for them to come inside the chamber and away from the tunnel, but this time they just turned their backs and ignored us. Message received, but when I heard claws scraping against rock and the faint sound of panting breaths in the distance I knew it wasn't the Shifters. They hadn't seemed to notice it themselves, but now I was panicked. They were lambs for the slaughter and I didn't know what to do about it.

‘They're not listening,’ I said, my anxiety levels rising. I didn't like them but the didn't deserve to suffer the way they would if they continued to ignore us. ‘I don't know what to do.’

‘Can you protect them with a spell?’ Phenex asked, rubbing my arms in an attempt to soothe me. It worked marginally, but as the beasts drew closer nothing could stop me from tensing.

‘I could block off the tunnel, but they might perceive it as an attack and become another enemy to fight,’ I admitted.

‘What about caving in the tunnels?’ Abaddon asked.

I had thought of it, but I couldn't see a way that ended well for us. 'Then we would have to fight them again and we can't afford that when we need to be working together. The only other option would be trapping them inside, but I don't think any of us are cruel enough to do that to them. Plus, again, we need to be getting them on our side not killing them off.'

The brothers released similar sounding grunts, acknowledging my words as well as the wall we'd been unhelpfully backed into.

A snuffling noise that reminded me of a dog sniffing out a bone made me pause and tilt my head to listen. Shivers of ice-cold fear skittered down my spine and I knew that sound would haunt me for the rest of my life. They were so close...

'Come on!' I shouted at them and pointed more vehemently at the darkness behind them.

Our gestures became more frantic as Phenex, Oz, Abaddon and Qarinah caught on to what I was hearing as well, our panic pushing through into our actions. Finally, finally, a few of the Shifters clocked the sounds that weren't coming from them, their eyes darting to where we were now backing away, desperately urging them to get the fuck away from the damn tunnel.

It wasn't until a deep, rattling growl echoed through the darkness that they clued in to what we were trying to tell them, but they still didn't leave. Instead, the fire from the sconces glinted off large onyx scales as the Alpha dude slithered from where he'd been licking his wounded ego. He released a bone-chilling hiss in response to the growl and that seemed to mobilise them as well.

The scene we'd created had drawn more attention from the Angels and the Fae. The Fae, already understanding that something was happening, had moved into a battle formation, blades raised and ready to slice. Their expressions were serious. Deadly.

They would be fine.

The Angels, however, merely watched on with interest like they couldn't wait for the show and I wanted to lob a fucking rock at their heads and watch them tumble back down to our level, both physically and metaphorically. They needed to pull their heads out of the own asses and realise that this wasn't a joke, and we weren't their fucking entertainment.

I chose to ignore them. They could see for themselves what was happening and if they chose to sit back and watch rather than help then they could suffer whatever befell them.

'Ready?' Oz called out and he received confirmation from both Humans and Daemons, and even a head nod from Evander as if he had understood. Perhaps he had, but I didn't have the time to test the theory because the first beast was upon us.

A fireball came barrelling down a tunnel to our left but was quickly put out by a hurriedly uttered spell from the group closest. That blood-chilling rattling growl came next as claws clicked and scratched against the rocks slowly, deliberately. A predator's pace as it stalked its prey.

And then a different sound that my brain couldn't process came from within the chamber. Something dripped on my forehead. I lifted a hand to swipe at it, and my breath froze in my lungs when I saw it wasn't water. It was too red.

I tilted my head back to look my knees almost gave way at what I found. Blood spurted as bones crunched and flesh rendered, the Angel dead before she could even scream. Red dripped down upon us in a macabre waterfall while we all stared in disbelief, and then I jumped back, stumbling into Oz and Qarinah as gravity tore the lower half of her body from the thin tendons that were struggling to hold her together and her legs fell right where I'd been standing.

I wanted to wretch at the wet slapping sound they made as they hit the floor, bouncing up momentarily and rolling a small distance away before coming to a stop, but my body refused to wake up enough to do even that. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't think. All I could do was just stare at the severed limbs and pray to the gods that it was all in my head. It couldn't be real. It just couldn't .

Another rattling growl vibrated the ground, closer than before, and my head snapped back up. The beasts were now inside the chamber, blocking the tunnels and trapping us inside with them. They were at least three times our size, covered in a thick, leathery hide littered with scars that blended into the walls. If they were curled up asleep I would have walked right past them believing them nothing more than large boulders. They were anything but. Soulless black eyes bore down on us, scanning for which prey to consume first. Thin grey lips pulled back over elongated snouts tipped with four slits for nostrils to reveal row after row of sharp, yellowed, snagged teeth. Saliva dripped menacingly from their jaws, their hunger evident in more ways than one. I followed the path of one particular drop as it fell, landing between two feet tipped with sharp, black, serrated claws that extended probably as long as my entire forearm.

The Shifters had fully joined us, backed into the chamber by the massive beasts, and I caught the Alpha's eye. He was frowning at me, something indecipherable flashing behind his eyes that I didn't even try to catch. I let myself wonder, just for a moment, why he had shifted back into his humanoid form rather than stay a serpent, but there was no time to dwell on answers that I wouldn't receive.

I felt so stupid. In every single horror movie ever made, the victims always made the same mistake. It was like Alien and Jurassic Park combined. They were hunting in packs, distracting us down below while their friends attacked from above. I should have known better after shouting at the TV so many times. No one ever looked up.

And neither had we.

Rakshasa

She had tried to warn us. After all the tension, distrust, and conflict between us, she had known these beasts were coming and had tried to warn us.

They all had.

I didn't know what to make of it. My head was spinning with the implications, but most of all I didn't want to admit that I had been wrong. I still believed she was too short and far too childlike to be an Alpha's mate, yet there was something about her that was rubbing off on all of those people surrounding her that made her... not stronger, exactly, but... I supposed that was exactly the word. Her mental fortitude was strong, her power great, and despite the blatant terror shining through in those big blue eyes she was still standing strong in the face of that fear.

Perhaps our ideals on Alpha Mate material were a little too... skewed. Perhaps strength came in more ways than just the size of one's muscles and the force of one's fists.

Or perhaps I was insane for letting my thoughts drift toward my little Witch mate when I should have been focusing on the immediate threat.

The standoff was broken when a Warlock had enough and lobbed some sort of offensive spell at the beast closest to him. Unfortunately for us all, it did absolutely nothing. It opened its mouth, shot out a quick, short burst of fire that collided with the spell before it could do any damage, and it exploded in a whoosh of power that knocked over those within its vicinity.

Chaos ensued.

Alarmed shouts sounded as the beast leapt at those that had fallen, crushing some beneath its heavy weight, cleaving some in two with its serrated claws, and chomping down on others with its massive, deadly jaws.

The fight had begun.

‘Orders, Alpha?’ Arcturus asked.

‘Large predators, Shift!’

On cue he shifted into his polar bear form, the large white beast towering over everyone yet still two sizes too small compared to whatever the hell those things were. The reminded me of dragons both in physical appearance, temperament, and their ability to breathe fire, but they were missing wings. These things, whatever they were, stood on four legs a regular quadruped. But because I didn’t know what they were, I had no idea how to defeat them.

The Fae were slashing at them as they approached, their blades drawing blood and wails of agony from the large beasts, but they didn’t seem to slow them down. Instead, they only seemed to incense them further. Roars of rage tore from their chests and vibrated the chamber. Rocks slid loose and tumbled to the ground, making things harder for the Angels to fight in the air. They were now dodging claws and jaws while also trying to avoid being crushed by their surroundings. A few of them dropped down to fight with us, avoiding the overhead attacks in favour of ground combat.

I could tell by their pinched expressions that they were loathe to do so, so I took a certain amount of pleasure when another one of them was shredded by one of the beast’s jagged teeth, body parts raining down on us all. Pompous pricks, the lot of

them.

I caught sight of Arcturus and his mate, Bellatrix, a fierce a lioness Shifter that I had once considered for my own mate. She had challenged me and lost, just like all the others, but at least she had found her match in my second. They worked well together, but when Bellatrix was slice by a stray claw and whimpered in pain, it distracted Arcturus from his own fight. He rushed to her aide, leaving a group of Humans and Daemons unprotected, but his distraction cost him as well. He charged at the beast that had injured his mate, but the beast was bigger, stronger, and heavier. It lifted its foot and swatted him away like he was nothing but an annoying bug, then returned its attention back to where Bellatrix was attempting to crawl away.

I needed to act quick before either of them were killed. I had Shifted back into my original form for the exact purpose. I was able to climb more quickly with my arms than without them, but I was also able to access certain traits from my second form, like my venom. I ran around the edges of the room, dodging attacks and pulling those in harm's way out of the danger zone when I could, but my focus remained intent.

When I got close enough, I pushed off the wall with my feet and jumped onto the beast's back. It roared at being mounted and tried to shake me off, twisting its head to shoot streams of fire and gnash its teeth, but I avoided all of its attempts. Instead, I dug my fingers into its thick, leathery hide, using more force than I had anticipated to break through the skin, and then I spat in the wound.

My venom sizzled when it made contact with its blood and worked its way quickly through the beast's system. It writhed and thrashed, but I had done my job so I leapt off its back, grabbed Bellatrix, and ran us out of the way. I left her with her mate who was shaking away the remnants of what was undoubtedly a concussion, but we healed quickly. Nothing could keep us down for long except a fatal blow, but we ensure they were never easy to land.

Arcturus's large head nodded to me with his gratitude before he covered Bellatrix's body with his own, providing her a safe space to heal. She would be back in the fray within a few moments and they were safe for the time being, so I left them to continue poisoning the beasts.

The one I had already infected with my venom was dead now, the toxins eating away at its flesh from the inside out. Nothing could survive that, and pride swelled inside my chest at the fatal ferocity of my second form. There were so many ways I could kill, so many ways to adapt to the hunt. I was a force to be reckoned with, and while these beasts found that out the hard way I was going to enjoy every second of it.

And if I was showing off a little bit for my little Witch mate to see, I'd never admit it.

As I scanned the battlefield for my next target, my eyes caught on my little Witch mate and her Daemon lover. They had been separated from the rest of their group by one of the beasts that was in the process of cornering them against a wall and a stalagmite, blocking any path to their freedom. They shared a look that spoke of so much affection that should not have been possible in the brief time they had known one another. Then again, I wasn't one to talk. I didn't love her by any means, but she had claimed me as hers and I had yet to actually dispute it.

That one looked shredded something deep within my chest and panic seized me. When they clasped hands, resignation clear on their faces despite their determination to fight until the end, and I knew they were saying goodbye.

Unacceptable. The only beast allowed to kill my little Witch was me, but even as I thought it I knew it wasn't true. The truth slammed into me with so much force that I momentarily lost my breath, but I didn't stop running for them. I didn't want her to die, and definitely not at my own hand.

I didn't stop to process the revelation. There was no time.

With practiced ease, I leapt onto the beast's back and pulled its attention away from her. This one was a significantly trickier to hold onto, however, and I struggling to maintain my grip. Its hide was somehow thicker, more difficult to penetrate, but I didn't let up, digging my dingers in deeper and twisting my nails in further until the telltale sound of flesh rendering reached my ears. That little bit of give was enough to pry open its flesh until it blood seeped through, and I wasted no time in spitting my venom directly into its vein.

It reared back, a deafening screech echoing throughout the cavern and shaking even more rocks loose from the walls. One of the tunnels began to collapse, and I knew then that if we didn't get out of here now we never would.

I slid from its back to land in a crouch in front of my little Witch, silently checking her over for any signs of injuries. She had a few scrapes and bruises, but nothing that screamed that it needed immediate attention. I relaxed, knowing she was safe for the time being but tensed again when I remembered we were a long way from safety.

'Thanks,' she said, and my brows rose high on my head when the single word registered as one that I recognised.

'Do not thank me until the battle is over, little Witch,' I told her, and her eyes widened with shock.

The Daemon glanced between us, a small knowing smile playing on his lips. He said something to her that I couldn't understand, but her rapid nodding clued me in to what was said. When she kept going I shot my hand out to stop her, concerned she would injure her brain with the repetitive motion. She blinked at me, then those pink lips spread into a wide grin and my heart thumped excitedly inside my chest. My cocks chose that moment to unsheathe themselves, the bloodlust from the battle mixing with my sudden lust for her coursing through my veins like lightning. The energy continued to crackle between us until my hand was knocked away by the

Human male that was constantly by her side. The one who shared her eyes.

A steady stream of groups joined us, Shifters, Humans, Daemons and Fae, and a male I did not recognise as a threat called out to my little Witch. I didn't know why I couldn't understand him when I could understand her, but that was a mystery to unravel later.

Luckily, her response provided me a clue to the topic of conversation. I scanned the room as they talked, noting how the Angels were the only ones left fighting the last remaining beast, but my instincts told me there were more to come.

My little Witch pointed to the tunnel on the opposite side of the room. 'That's the way out. Come on,' she said and pushed forward to lead the way. I wondered how she knew where to go, but the thought didn't stick when the Daemon male tangled his fingers with hers, a deliberate claiming of my little Witch mate that had me seeing red.

I was jostled out of my haze of fury right before I lunged, and I turned to see the skin form of Arcturus and Bellatrix. He lifted a single eyebrow in a silent question and I conceded to his point. Killing the Daemon helped no one.

We trailed after my little Witch mate and her entourage, and though I detested putting my trust in anyone other than myself, I prayed to the gods that she was genuine in her direction and was truly leading us to freedom.

Hawthorne

We'd been moving with the trees for two days total now and we were still no closer to finding Oz and the others. The only reason I knew they were alive was due to the visions. Juniper couldn't be dead because her fate wouldn't allow it. Not yet, at least, and hopefully not for a very long time, but at least for now she was safe.

Or as safe as one could get in the middle of a deadly trial surrounded by an array of previously mythological beings that, from our own experiences, were largely unpleasant.

Enid and I had stumbled across Daemons, Fae, Shifters and Angels, though the only ones that were even remotely kind were surprisingly the Daemons. The last three had been either rude, aggressive, or a combination of both so we'd kept to ourselves and stayed away from any groups that formed.

We hadn't found any other Humans, which was concerning in more ways than one. There had been a few that had survived being kidnapped by the trees, but even since they had been infected with that mysterious black cloud we hadn't seen hide nor hair of them. As far as Enid and I knew, we were the only ones left...

Enid was snacking on some nuts while I munched on some sweet berries that were like some sort of raspberry crossed with an apple and orange. It was an interesting flavour and I wasn't the most keen on them, but they were edible, juicy, and weren't like some of the other fruits we'd tried.

My taste buds would never recover from the vile, bitter, vomit-like flavour of what

we had assumed were peaches but were, in fact, the devil's fruit. Enid still chuckled over it, too, since she had seen my reaction and avoided them herself. I was hiding one to get her back eventually. I wasn't going to be the only one to suffer.

'Do you think they're okay?' she asked around a mouthful of nuts, and not for the first time.

'I know they are.' My answer was the same every time, but I didn't begrudge her need to hear it. I was reassured myself every time I confirmed it out loud.

'What trial do you think they're facing, because we've just been wondering around for a few days while letting the trees fatten us up.'

I snorted, though her comment was only half made with humour. The trees could have very well been fattening us up before they devoured us, but I didn't think so. Either, way, Enid and I were no Hansel and Grettel. We weren't easy prey.

'From what I've seen in my visions, they're having a blast.'

I'd had a few more visions since the one with Juniper and the Fae. Another occurred with an Angel that I'd purposely shoved to the deepest recesses of my mind, but Oz had starred in the others. They were also basically porn like Juniper's were, though he was with a scarlet skinned Daemon that looked like sex on a stick and drizzled with trouble, yet there was something about her that turned me off and I couldn't quite put my finger on it. Perhaps it was because I'd been forced to watch her fuck my best friend and we didn't share women. I didn't get the sense she was an enemy, it was more like a lack of attraction despite her near perfect body and expertly irresistible come-fuck-me eyes.

She just didn't do it for me.

I kept stealing glances at Enid, though. While I had been struggling to get it up for

anyone but Juniper lately, I knew exactly how stunning Enid was. I knew how she felt as I slid inside her wet heat. I knew how to make her walls flutter and clench around me. I knew how to draw sounds out of her that no man had ever managed.

And most importantly, I knew how much she loved me, even if she did try to hide it.

She was everything I should ever want in a woman, and yet why couldn't I feel the same way? The answer was simple, yet so, so complicated. I had feelings for Enid, I enjoyed fucking her, dominating her, and sending her over the edge. We were friends and had been close for a very long time. On paper, we were the perfect couple, but I just couldn't shake the feeling that there was something missing. Something only Juniper could give me.

To this day, I still hadn't figured out what it was, just that it was there.

But was it really that important? Enid could be mine if I simply took that leap of faith. I could be content with her. We could have an amazing life together, and a part of me wanted that. I wanted to let go of my feelings for the woman that would never love me back and move on with the woman who did. I wanted to let my feelings develop beyond friendship, beyond the sexual, and settle comfortably into the romantic.

But that word was what stopped me every time. Settle. Enid deserved better than someone settling for second best. She deserved to be someone's first choice and top priority. She deserved that all-encompassing love I was so stuck on finding with the wrong woman.

If I chose her, I needed to let the rest of it go.

'What's got you thinking so hard over there?' she asked, jolting me out of my thoughts. I blushed, not wanting to explain to her the trail my mind had taken me, but I gave her a fond smile that she returned.

‘What?’ she asked, cheeks spotted with pink.

‘Nothing,’ I shrugged. I could tell she didn’t believe me, but I still had a lot of thinking to do before I encouraged that conversation. We would have it eventually, but not until I could give her the answers she needed.

The trees stilled then, their roots frozen in place as the sounds of the animals that called them home immediately silenced. Enid and I froze along with them have long since learned to follow their lead. They ran when danger was near and stayed relatively still when the coast was clear. This sudden stillness, however, was new.

I understood their hesitation, however, when I felt the vibrations beneath my feet.

‘Thorne...’ Enid whispered, panic lacing her tone and raising it’s pitch. ‘What’s going on?’

I gripped her hand in mine and pulled her close, quickly pocketing the rest of our fruit and nuts so that we had our hands free for whatever was coming our way.

The vibrations grew until they were full blown shakes, the earth quaking so hard we fell to our knees. When a crack formed in the ground, a circular hole that spiderwebbed out, we scrambled away as quickly as we could. The trees were already on the move, rushing away from the hole in the ground that I realised with a gut-sinking sensation that it was rapidly expanding by the second.

‘Thorne...’ Enid shouted over the roar of the earth, her fear causing her nails to dig into my skin as she gripped onto me like I was her lifeline.

We continued to scrabble back, barely keeping ourselves from falling into whatever abyss that hole led to, and I sincerely hoped it wasn’t something’s gullet. Being swallowed whole was definitely not on my bucket list.

Finally, the expansion slowed until it the only movement were the edges still crumbling. However, when I tentatively peered over the edge, my heart was happy not to have an attack because nothing lunged out at me from inside.

Enid joined me, staring wide-eyed into the dark abyss that had almost gobbled us up like Pacman. ‘What do you think is down there?’ she whispered, cleverly trying not to draw any unwanted attention to us in case there was, in fact, something lurking within its black depths.

‘I don’t know, and I’m not too eager to find out...’ I admitted, a shiver shuddering through me at the thought of going inside to check it out.

There was one odd thing about it that didn’t escape my notice. On the distant side of the hole seemed to be some sort of ramp, like the earth had opened up at the end of a tunnel to spit out any travellers at our feet.

‘We should go,’ I said, rising to stand and nervously swiping at the dirt on my clothes. I’d lost some of the snacks in my pocket and had squashed the remainder of the fruits and berries. My hand came away sticky, but there wasn’t anything to be done for it. With the trees gone, so was the water and any means I had to wash myself clean.

We had only taken a single step when a sound echoed out from the hole, freezing us in our tracks. I held my breath, surely imagining it but straining my ears just to be sure.

‘Was that...?’

And there it was again. It was faint, but I was sure of it now. A yell, distinctly male and very much real. It was proceeded with a faint rattling sound that was very distinctly not a person. In fact, it reminded me of the rumbling noises the T-Rex made in Jurassic Park ...

‘Oh, hell no. There’d better not be a fucking dinosaur down there,’ I said, my feet already moving me away from the opening.

‘What? What are you talking about? What dinosaur? Enid asked, her breaths coming in short and fast pants as her panic took over once again.

‘I don’t know what it was, but I didn’t like the sound of it. We need to go. Now.’

But then I heard the one thing that could have possibly made me stay rather than run.

‘There’s a split up ahead! Juniper, which way?’

Enid and I shared a shocked glance and then rushed back to the still slowly crumbling circumference of the hole.

‘Holy shit, Thorne. Do you think Oz is with her?’

‘I fucking hope so,’ I said, hope fluttering around inside my chest.

‘Right!’ I heard her familiar voice, though her current tone was a new one. She had always been so bright and bubbly, so hearing her sound so serious and frightened was hard to stomach.

‘It’s a dead end, Juniper! We can’t go that way!’ someone else called back and my anxiety spiked. Had she accidentally trapped them? Did we need to go in there to save them?

‘Dig through it! It will make it harder for those things to follow!’ she replied, her voice louder, clearer, closer than before.

Grunts echoed back to us followed by more of that unnerving rattling sound that I now realised was a growl. Yup. Definitely a fucking dinosaur. Fuck my life.

‘Do we help them?’ Enid asked, anxiously biting her lips and picking at her fingernails.

‘I’m not sure there’s anything we can do,’ I admitted, hating the words as they left my mouth. Our helplessness was only working to ratchet up our blood pressure even higher than it already was.

A light appeared like a spec in the distance, slowly illuminating the darkness as it grew, the colour a warm orange that looked familiar, but it wasn’t clicking in my head where I’d seen it before.

Until Enid pulled me back with a shout. ‘Fire!’

We stumbled back just in time to avoid the giant fireball that exploded out of the hole, shooting up into the air where it eventually died out.

‘What the...?’

I heard it then, frantic scraping noises nearby where the earth began to cave in. It started off small, just a tiny divot in the dust, but then it pulsed like it had a heartbeat, the diameter slowly expanding like the other hole except at a fraction of the rate. Finally, when it was large enough to fit a car, the centre gave out to reveal grime-covered fingers and a collective gasp for breath. Coughing followed as whomever it was that was crawling out of the ground tried to grasp something to help haul themselves out. When they kept slipping, I snapped out of my frozen state and rushed forward to help.

As soon as my hands grasped theirs they screamed and I hurried to reassure them that I wasn’t some monster trying to eat them.

‘It’s okay! I’m trying to help. Hold on and I’ll pull you out.’

‘Thorne? That you?’ Oz called from somewhere inside the newest hole.

‘Oz! Yeah, it’s me. Enid’s here, too,’ I said which prompted her to join me in heaving them out. Another rattling growl shuddered the earth and we upped our efforts, desperation lending us more strength.

The first one out was a man I recognised from around campus. I thought his name was Gordon or something beginning with G, but we’d never spoken. He used to hang around Juniper for a while before they drifted apart. Next was Kendra, and I let Enid take care of her since we didn’t have time for her to latch onto me and start crying the way she clearly wanted to. She had always been dramatic, but I didn’t have the patience or the time for it now.

The next hand that reached up was bright red and hesitated for a beat before I hauled her out, too. It was the scarlet Daemon I had seen with Oz in my visions. I decided I liked her when instead of running off, she immediately reached down to help me pull the others out.

‘They’re getting closer!’ Juniper warned. ‘Hurry!’

One after one we got their feet on the ground. Humans, Daemons, Shifter, Fae, and Angels. All five supernatural races stuck in the ground, working together to dig themselves out.

Finally, everyone was out. Oz wrapped me and Enid up in a bear hug, a rare show of affection from the man before we all took off running. Juniper was to my right holding hands with the purple Daemon I had met before at the portal, the same one from the vision, and a dark skinned male with glowing yellow eyes sprinted on her other side. When he twisted to scan his new surroundings I swore I saw the sun flash off a patch of onyx scales and my heart dropped into my stomach.

I had pulled the Fae and the Angel from the visions out as well, which meant she had

met all four of them men she was going to have to choose between, though it seemed she had already picked some favourites.

My thoughts cut off when the ground shook, almost sending me toppling headfirst into the ground. We picked up speed, and I didn't dare look back to see what was chasing us, because beneath the dirt and grime the people surrounding me were bruised, broken and bleeding and I didn't want to come face-to-face with the cause.

Unfortunately, a vicious roar ripped through the air and I slammed my hands over my ears to try to ease the painful onslaught. I stumbled due to the action, but Oz stabilised me and kept close just in case.

'There's a portal up ahead!' Juniper suddenly called out. 'Look!'

I couldn't see with so many people in front of me, and I wondered how she could tell when she was even shorter than me. It must have had something to do with her Earth Affinity, but now wasn't the time to sate my curiosity.

Instead, the thump of large, heavy feet stomping down on the earth could be felt everywhere. Even the air shuddered with fear as I felt like something was literally breathing down my neck.

Without questioning the impulse, I lowered myself to the ground and yelled 'duck!'

Almost everyone followed my lead. If they hadn't heard my warning then they at least took action when they saw the people around them throw themselves to the floor. But not everyone did. A fireball crashed into those few who were still standing, their screams cut short as the heat of the flame snuffed out their lives within seconds.

'Incoming to the left!' Juniper yelled again and rolled in my direction. In the exact spot she'd just vacated was a long, black, serrated claw attached to a meaty foot covered in a thick layer of grey skin. Without thinking, I reached out and tugged her

to me, covering her body with my own as an actual, literal dinosaur reared up and released that familiar chilling, rattling growl.

More of its friends joined in before surrounding us from all angles, pinning us in. My breaths sawed in and out of my lungs as terror consumed me, but all thoughts stilled and narrowed in on Juniper's safety. In that moment, protecting her was all that mattered.

Cold, lifeless black eyes glared down at us as a heavy snout lowered to snap up the closest person, their screams of terror and agony cutting off as a crunch sounded and the beast swallowed them down with a gulp.

Juniper whimpered beneath me, and I smoothed my hand over her hair as one of her hands snaked out to reach for the purple Daemon. He met her halfway, their fingers tangling together and while she shared a look brimming with an abundance of affection. A look I had always wished she'd send my way.

But if we were going to die, I wasn't going to go out without telling her how I felt. I tilted my face down so my lips brushed her ear.

'Juniper...' I began, my voice a shaky, sorrowful whisper, but I was cut off by a monstrous shriek.

'Run,' she said. 'Now!'

I didn't hesitate. I jumped to my feet, pulling her with me and took off at a sprint. We darted around the monsters which were being attacked by... people?

No. Their eyes were just as black as the beasts, shadowy veins spreading even further than I remembered to encompass their entire bodies, at least from what available skin I could see. Whatever that black cloud was that had infected them, it had turned them into an entirely new type of monster, but they were causing enough of a distraction

for us to slip by and keep running for the portal.

I could see it now, shimmering in a selection of pale rainbow shades, its call like a heartbeat promising safety, if only we could get to the other side.

‘Don’t look back!’ Juniper shouted, though it wasn’t clear who exactly she was talking to, us or herself.

A snarl sounded alongside pounding footsteps and I instinctively knew they didn’t belong to any of us. The infected were giving chase, and they were gaining on us.

‘Move, move, move!’ I screamed, pumping my arms harder and stretching my legs into longer strides.

An Angel shot through the portal, their wings beating so heavily that the gust they created almost knocked us back. I growled, pushing through it and pulling Juniper along with me. Oz had Enid on my other side, and the two purple Daemons were helping the red one not to fall behind.

More people jumped through, some of them diving in headfirst, others skidding though feet first, and others merely kept running as if there was nothing there, disappearing behind the iridescent magic.

Just as we reached it, however, it was like a wall shot up to block me from entering. Juniper was torn from my gasp, her momentum carrying her forward until she skidded to a halt and turned back for me. Her eyes were so wide they took up the majority of her face, and she rushed back to me.

A look over my shoulder told me I didn’t have time for this, so I tried again, only to meet the same resistance.

‘Thorne, come on!’ she shouted, reaching out to me but I just couldn’t get through.

When Oz and Enid reached the portal, Oz shot through barrier like it didn't exist, his momentum sending him falling into the portal despite his attempts to take back Enid's hand. She had also met the resistance, and we shared a look filled with resigned fear.

Something seemed to click inside Juniper's mind, however, and she bounded toward her Daemon friends. She stopped them before they could step through and said something, pointing back to me and Enid. Urgency made her motions jerky, and the one from my visions bent down to press a kiss to the top of her head. She gave him an odd look that morphed into one of betrayal when he shoved her into the portal, her reaching hands the last to disappear.

Then he came for me and what he did only confused me. He grabbed my hand and shook it once, then said a single word. 'Phenex.'

What was he doing? Didn't he know we were going to die? Why was he staying behind when he could be with Juniper? He needed to just leave me here to my fate.

He shook my hand again and pointed to himself, panic sharpening his tone when he repeated that word. His name?

Oh. 'Hawthorne,' I replied, and he smiled, relieved, then turned to Enid and did the same. When she gave him her name he grabbed us both and yanked, the barrier suddenly gone.

'Come on, let's go!' he shouted, his words suddenly comprehensible. And just as I felt fingers brushing my back, we leaped.

To be continued...