



Whispered Warnings, Part One (Broken Ashes #2)

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Description: I've got some explaining to do, I know that. I mean, I'd have questions if I were in their position, too. The problem is I don't have any answers for them, and I seem to be unable to keep things to myself when I'm around them, which means I, of course, shared, and now they're panicking about how many times I've died. Silly men. It's not like it's a big deal or anything. Oh wait, it is.

Then there's Winston and the spirit guides; I don't even know where to start with them.

The building tension between the guys and me is just another complication that adds a bit more excitement to my suddenly even more complicated life.

We've still got to figure out what's happening to the supes, I promised Navy, after all!

Oh, and figure out why the people I worked for killed me and who they were talking about.

So, not much to do! Who am I kidding? I need a snack and a nap just thinking about it!

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Neith

I admit that this must be a shock for them; I mean, I was dead, and there was no mistake about it. I had a knife sticking out of my chest, out of my heart, if you want to be really precise about it. Having said that, I don't really know how to handle this situation, and I am really fucking hungry.

So hungry, that it is pretty much my main priority right now, and the only thing that I can focus on. No one can ever tell me I don't have my priorities straight.

"Here," Winston says with a happy smile as he hands me a fucking pizza.

I sit up and take it, eyeing the gooey, cheesy pepperoni goodness. I might be in love. Taking a huge, unladylike bite, I wait for the guys to say something and stuff my face.

"Dude, I am so keeping you. I could have done with food this quickly after the last time," I tell Winston since the guys are still staring at me, and Winston is grinning at me like a proud parent.

I don't miss the shock in his eyes though and it makes my heart beat quicker, he is a spirit guide, so old that he is practically ageless, he has most likely seen eons, and yet something about what just happened has shocked him. I don't want to think about it for too long because the implications are massive and scary.

"Last time?" Evander manages to grit out, panic still in his eyes from witnessing the whole ordeal.

I wince. I need to come up with something to reply because I don't think that we have the time for me to explain how I really arrived at their house, at least not right this second. If I am being honest with myself, I am absolutely terrified that when they hear what really happened, they aren't going to want me around anymore and are going to kick me out of the house, their team, and their lives.

I'm trying to delay that for as long as I possibly can, thankfully before I have to reply, my eyes catch on Reed, "Oh my fucking god, you are stunning."

Reed's eyes widen, "What?"

"Your wings, they are fucking awesome," I tell him. I really wish I could come up with a better descriptor, but they have stunned me into silence, which is evidence enough of how magnificent they are.

His wings are enormous, and I mean truly massive. I can tell that even though they are folded against his back. He must have a really strong glamour on him all the time because I had no idea that he had wings. Although the guys did say I could see through glamour, so maybe he is some kind of supernatural that shifts? Even though I can see his wings, I don't think he is entirely shifted. I don't know why I feel that way, but something tells me that there is even more to Reed than maybe even Reed knows.

I roll my eyes at my inner thoughts. Apparently, I think a lot of myself now, and I'm now thinking I know shit that I have no way of truly knowing other than a feeling. Apart from the leathery-looking wings that have barely visible patterns on them and sharp, deadly spikes on the tips of each wing, he looks the same. Maybe a little bit bigger, if that's even possible, the dude is fucking huge.

I tilt my head and stuff more pizza in my mouth as I study him, and he watches me like I am fucking terrifying. Which makes no sense.

“What is happening right now?” River asks, his voice edging on hysteria.

I drag my eyes away from Reed, the hysteria in River’s voice making me want to check on him. As soon as my eyes land on him, I see the pain in his eyes and the tear marks on his face and realize that he is a lot closer than I thought he was. I reach my hand up, cupping his cheek and almost melting as his eyes close and he takes a deep breath. His reaction to my touch shifts something in me, and I refuse to look too closely at what it is.

“I’m really sorry I scared you,” I say honestly, “I couldn’t let him kill Reed, and I knew without a single doubt that was what was going to happen.”

“Did you know that you would be stabbed?” Reed questions, somewhat redundantly since I pretty much just answered that.

“Yes,” I reply honestly, because at this point, what would be the point of lying?

“You knew,” he repeats and then explodes, “Don’t ever risk your life for mine!” he bellows, “You could have died!”

His power is more unrestrained than I have ever known it because as soon as he starts yelling at me, the guys hit the floor, apart from Winston, who just rolls his eyes. River narrowly misses face-planting my pizza.

“Dude,” I start, still munching on the pizza because, as always, I have my priorities straight.

“Don’t dude me! You panicked all of us. Don’t fucking do it again! Don’t ever move between us and danger. None of us want you to. You could have fucking died,” he repeats, still screaming at me as he stands and starts pacing inside; what I am only just noticing is a golden bubble?

Huh, that's a weird one, oh it's so pretty.

I wonder if I could pop it.

Probably not a good idea.

The longer I stare at it, the more I become certain that it was made by Ransom, just like with Doc and Reed, I can instinctively tell that this is his magic. It also contains insanely strong magic, even stronger magic than I thought Ransom had, and I thought he was pretty fucking powerful to begin with.

The more time that I spend with these guys the clearer it is becoming that these guys are hiding a lot of themselves and what they are truly capable of. I can't be pissed at them though, because I'm doing exactly the same thing. Even though I am going to tell them about the dying and coming back, unless they explicitly ask me, I won't be telling them how many times I have died, I think that is better kept to myself.

At least, I should for now.

So you see, I can't be mad at them for keeping things from me because I am keeping things from them, and I'm going to continue to do so.

Reed is still yelling at me, and it's starting to piss me off now. I mean, where is the gratitude? Also, the guys are clearly uncomfortable being smooshed to the floor with Reed's power, and that's just not fair.

Pushing up to stand, I notice that the worry in the eyes of the guys on the floor increases; I decide to wink at them. I don't know why, and I'm pretty sure it doesn't help, if anything it makes it worse, but hey, I tried. Taking another bite of my pizza, I refocus on a still-ranting Reed, who is so into his argument that he hasn't even realized that I have stood up.

“Oi!” I yell, and he grinds to a halt, his eyes widening with disbelief as he sees me standing. He takes a step toward me, but before he can utter a single word, I let it rip. “A couple of things, one, I do not regret saving you, and I will put myself between you and danger every single fucking time,” I tell him firmly, and I will admit loudly, as my pizza smacks him in the chest, when he got that close I have no fucking idea, “two, I will do the same for all of you and there is fuck all you can do about it and three, I did fucking die Reed, so maybe some gratitude? A thank you? Or better yet, more fucking pizza!”

He is literally towering over me, we are now close enough that our chests are touching, I no longer have my pizza in my hand, and I am one hundred percent certain that it is squashed between the two of us.

Whoops.

His wings have opened and arch behind him, threatening to distract me. They really are breathtaking. Even up close, I still can’t make out the patterns on them, it’s really strange. I know they are there, but I couldn’t tell you what the pattern looks like, whether it’s words or pictures or abstract, the only thing I can say for certain is that there is some kind of pattern on them.

Reed’s eyes are blazing, and he slowly lifts his hand, gently cupping my cheek.

“You really aren’t scared of me, are you?” he asks, his voice considerably quieter than it was and a direct contrast to the blazing fire in his eyes.

I shrug, which probably looks weird since we are so close; I have definitely squashed the pizza even more and most likely rubbed it in and made an even bigger mess by shrugging, but it’s not like I can take it back now.

I am also trying to ignore the fact that my heart is trying to pound out of my chest

from the feel of his giant palm gently cupping my cheek. That shit is fucking magic, and I swear it's sending small zaps of awareness to my needy vagina, and he is only touching my cheek. Not even my ass cheek.

Remembering that he asked me a question, I reply, "Why would I be?"

His lips tilt up ever so slightly before they fall, and he adds, "I'm terrified of you."

I feel like there is more to that statement than the surface reason because he can't actually be scared of me and my yelling.

I don't think I can handle the real meaning behind it right now, so instead, I say, "You should really let your friends up off the floor."

His eyes widen slightly as he glances over my shoulder. His power snaps back to him as he returns to normal, his wings disappearing, and I am still none the wiser about whether it is a glamour, or if he shifts.

My eyebrows pull down into a frown. The lightness that he had around him has gone completely, and I can't even begin to imagine how hard it must be to conceal and control such a big part of you. I don't understand why he couldn't just pull his power back only a small amount, enough to let the guys get up. I also don't know why it affects them so much and not me. I can feel his power; I know how strong it is. He is by far the strongest here, but I am unaffected. I think that whatever kind of supe I am, which I still haven't processed, by the way, is super weak. I try not to snort at my internal joke and then roll my eyes because am I seriously joking right now? Yes, I am because I'm fucking hilarious and because if I don't, I might break down or actually have to deal with the revelations from earlier and then break down.

Fuck, a lot has happened in such a short amount of time.

Anyway, I think that my supernatural side is weak, so it's not affected by Reed; it's the only explanation that I can come up with. I am glad that I'm not effected by it though because it means that Reed gets to relax a little bit around me, and I like to think that helps him feel less different.

Of course, I could just be seeing things that don't exist and that my exhausted and just back from the Darkness brain has decided to latch on to because it doesn't want to focus on anything else.

"Oh fuck. I'm sorry, guys," Reed apologizes immediately and casts his eyes downward for a moment, but not before I see the guilt thrumming through them.

"Not your fault. I think you pretty much summed up what we were all thinking," Van says, staring at me.

I chose to ignore that because I can and I realize that I am still pressed against Reed, and I'm finding myself liking it just a bit too much. Before I have to have a word with my vagina and remind her that we literally just died, so our performance wouldn't be on top form, I start to move backward. Rolling my eyes at myself when I realize that is obviously not the most important problem with me being so comfortably pressed against Reed.

Note to self: Don't fuck your team members.

Pausing in my backward movement, I glance at his wings again and tilt my head to the side, "I wonder if he can fly and fuck at the same time?"

My eyes widen as someone chokes, and Reed's eyes flame and I mean literal fucking flames. I have no idea whether that is a good thing or not.

"Fucking hell," Raiden mutters, "even just back from the dead, she is fucking lethal."

“Ah shit,” I mutter. That was one of those things that I shouldn’t have said out loud. Finally, moving away from a statue still Reed, I wince as I realize the pizza I was eating is squashed to the front of his chest and smeared from my earlier shrug. “I’m sorry about the pizza stain; that’s probably not going to come out.”

“I’m fairly certain that isn’t even close to being on his radar right now,” Doc points out, sounding amused. However, I also detect a thrum of tension in his voice.

I decide to own it, I shrug, “Er, it’s a valid question.”

“Okay, Trouble, you come and stand near me for a moment and let everyone calm the fuck down,” Van says as he pulls me closer and tucks me under his arm. It doesn’t escape my notice that he holds onto me extra tight.

“Why is everyone still staring at me?” I ask after a moment of silence.

“For fuck sake, this is going to be harder than I thought,” Winston exclaims, throwing his tiny hands in the air. Giving me an unimpressed look, he adds, “I’m out, you need to call people and take this bubble down before it gains the wrong sort of attention, oh, and Neith, your boob is out.”

With that parting statement, he disappears. It’s only once he has gone that what he said registers. I glance down at my exposed boob, which has pizza smeared on it too, and I frown, “It’s not completely out, it’s still in a bra.”

“Someone get her a fucking shirt,” Doc groans, and I glance up from jiggling my own boobs, because boobs are fucking fun, to see that his eyes have gone gold. “Oh, your eyes are gorgeous. How is it fair that you all get pretty eyes?”

“Shit,” River curses. He rummages around in the bags that they all have and pulls out a large shirt, handing it to me and studiously keeping his eyes on my face.

There are a lot of emotions hidden in those eyes.

I pull it on and immediately lift the soft grey fabric over my nose, inhaling deeply. River's eyes spark with heat as he realizes that I'm smelling him. I'm not embarrassed about being caught; it takes a lot to embarrass me; I just had my boob out in front of hot as fuck supes and ones that are my team members.

I also can't help it. Weirdly enough it seems instinctual that I learn his scent and that is just strange on a whole other level. However, the voices who are still subdued, seem to agree as the mumbling gets louder before quietening down again.

His throat bobs as he swallows thickly and glances away.

I have no idea how we have gotten here. I died, and so far, all I have done since being back is eat and get horny. To be honest, that tracks, and I don't know why I'm surprised at my own behavior. I have had thirty odd years of me, I should be used to my own behavior by now.

"I think we should probably focus on what Winston said and get out of here, and we need to call this in," Ransom says, still staring at me.

I have a feeling that he is going to be doing that a lot, I did die and then came back to life, that's got to be a shock.

"We need to talk about what the fuck just happened," River exclaims.

"Yes, we do but I imagine that coming back from the dead is quite draining, and Neith needs to get home," Evander says, and then adds, "we can talk about it at home."

I nod, they still want me to go home with them, that's a good thing, right? They aren't

going to kick me out now that they realize just how weird I am, right? Fuck, they still don't know all of it.

Speaking, or well I guess I'm thinking, of weird, the voices are still there, still present although they seem even further away now, and more of a hum, like they are as exhausted as I am and that brief murmur of excitement when I sniffed River's shirt has worn them out even more.

"Food," I mutter, "I'm going to need more food."

Griff nods, "We can do that."

He shocks the shit out of me when he tugs me away from Van and into his arms, hugging me tightly.

I wrap my arms around him and lay my head on his chest. Well, sort of, he is so much bigger than me that my head barely reaches his nipples.

Stepping back, he looks down at me and demands, "Don't do that again."

I don't reply, because I can't promise him that. I die often, none of them need to know that though, so instead I just smile tightly, neither confirming nor denying his request.

"We need to get this shield down and see what we are dealing with. We have no idea what is happening outside of it," Doc says, getting us back on track but shooting me a curious look.

Yeah, the doctor of the group is bound to have a lot of questions. I do too, and if he can answer some of them then maybe I might get some of the answers that I have been looking for.

“Betty!” I suddenly exclaim, completely derailing the conversation that was going on that I had accidentally tuned out of.

“We can look for her once this shield is down,” Ransom reassures me, and I feel his magic build in the air.

“Wait!” I exclaim, and everyone looks at me, the others looking confused about why I just yelled whereas Ransom’s expression looks pleased. I’m not sure why.

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Neith

“What?” Van asks me.

Looking at Ransom, I say, “Is there a way that you can let us see out without anyone who may be out there being able to see in? I have visions of us being surrounded and immediately getting killed when the barrier drops.”

“Shit, I didn’t think of that,” Van replies and looks at Ransom questioningly.

Ransom shrugs, “Yeah, I am pretty sure I can do that. Give me a second.”

We all watch silently as he works, and I can’t help but study him. His bright blue eyes almost start to glow with power, and I swear for a brief moment the tattoos covering his arms also begin to move. Which is pretty fucking cool and signifies just how strong he is. I can’t remember the last time that I heard of a warlock having tattoos that were embedded with power. If ever, I’m going to have to look into that.

Of course, there is a really big chance that I could be seeing things.

I shake off my thoughts about tattoos that may or may not be moving when my brain decides that the best way that we can figure it out, is if we get up close and personal with them. I need to shoot that shit down now, it has the potential to get really messy, really fucking quickly.

“But you can look . There is no harm in that,” my inner voice says, and unfortunately, the voices are still far too subdued to override her with their usual hum of noise.

I guess she may have a point.

Ransom's hair is mussed, his clothes covered in dirt, blood, and God knows what else, and he has this small furrow between his eyebrows as he focuses on his magic. From what I can tell, he is not so much having to build his magic so that he can do the spell, but rather, he is having to hold his magic back so that he doesn't use too much.

"Why are you frowning at me, Neith?" Ransom asks as he looks up at me, momentarily distracted from the spell. The fact that he can just pause it halfway through is also a really big indicator of how strong he really is.

Not many warlocks are able to stop a spell because they want to ask a question. In fact, most warlocks wouldn't have even been aware that I was frowning at them.

I'm impressed, although I seem always to be impressed when it comes to these men.

I shake my head, questioning my theory, but deciding to ask him anyway, "Erm, well, I'm probably wrong, but it's not taking you a long time because you have to build your power, is it?"

Surprise flashes through his eyes, and he replies, "Why do you say that?"

"I can feel it," I frown, trying to find the right words to explain what my intuition is telling me, "you are having to hold back aren't you?"

"Damn," Doc whistles, "that's impressive."

"I'm right?" I ask.

Ransom nods, "You are."

“Awesome, let’s add that to the pile of shit I can do that we have no explanation for and come back to it later,” I say, hoping that my smile is believable because I’m very quickly becoming tired, and although that pizza that Winston gave me helped, I didn’t get to eat much of it thanks to Reed pissing me off. As I look around the golden bubble, I see that in my haste to yell at Reed for yelling at me, I have stepped in it.

It's inedible.

Shit.

All I have to do is last for a small while longer, and then I can raid the guy’s kitchen for something else to eat. They said they don’t cook, but they must have snacks and things in the house, surely?

The guys all seem to agree with me because no one says anything as we wait for Ransom to do his thing.

Suddenly, the bubble turns see-through, and I stare at the sight beyond. There are a few fallen bodies, people that we killed, but there aren’t nearly as many as there should be. We were very much overwhelmed, and there were far more attackers than I can currently see on the ground.

I frown, “Where are the others? The portal closed; they couldn’t have gone through it. Shit, if they are still around, it is going to be even more complicated than we thought to get back to the van.”

“They didn’t escape,” River says, “Reed . . .”

“Enough,” Reed interrupts, shaking his head.

“Seriously, I really don’t think that she . . .” Evander starts, but Reed silences him with a look and a slight flare of power.

River shrugs but shoots a concerned look in Reed’s direction before he continues speaking to me, “You don’t need to worry, they are gone.”

I raise both my eyebrows and nod, “Uh huh. While I know there is obviously more to that explanation, I also know there is no point in me asking, so I’m not going to.”

“Speaking of, how come there are still bodies out there?” Griff asks gruffly.

Reed tenses and replies, somewhat vaguely, “Only alive things.”

Okay, I am infinitely more curious now I know that he doesn’t want me to know. I wonder what it could be? Oh, what if he doesn’t want to tell me because it's embarrassing? Maybe he killed them all with flying dildos, that would be fucking hilarious.

I snicker as I peer out of the bubble to see if I can see any still lying on the floor. Imagine death by flying dildo.

“Do we want to know why you are giggling?” Griff asks, raising an eyebrow.

“Probably not,” Evander answers with an amused smile.

“Hey!” I exclaim indignantly.

He raises his eyebrows, a knowing look on his face as he asks, “If I’m wrong, tell us what was going through that beautiful mind of yours?”

I am momentarily stuck on the fact that he called me beautiful, well, my mind but I’ll

take a compliment where I can get one, especially from Evander. They mean more and no, I don't intend to look at why that is the case.

His smirk widening brings me back to my senses, and I reply, "Fuck off."

"My point exactly," Van grins triumphantly, making all the guys laugh.

I could tell them about my dildo theory, and I usually would have, whether I wanted to or not, since I have very little control over my brain-to-mouth filter. However, I have already shown them just how weird I am by dying and coming back to life, and I really don't want to push it.

Apparently, even my inner ramblings are aware of that and don't want to fuck it up any more than we most likely have, so for once, they are working with me and staying quiet.

I wonder if my usual lack of tact when it comes to saying exactly what is on my mind is because of something to do with my supernatural side.

As soon as that thought crosses my mind I instantly bulk, yeah, I am not ready for that thought process to continue.

"You are going to have to think about it at some point," my inner voice says. This time I manage to avoid listening to her easily enough since the voices have now grown in volume and are drowning that bitch out, thank God. Come at me with fucking logic, who does she think she is?

I am brought out of my inner ramblings when Ransom says, "I don't see anything to be concerned about, we should probably call Ty though."

River stiffens, his eyes on something behind me, and asks with an edge to his voice,

“Erm, what can someone see from the outside, looking in our direction?”

Ransom’s expression muddies with confusion, but he answers River anyway, “We are invisible, so they just see the landscape as it is supposed to be, trees and shit.”

“Awesome,” I mutter and earn myself a pleased smile from Ransom.

Evander narrows his eyes at River, “Why do you ask?”

“I asked because I am fairly certain that I saw that one’s hand twitch,” River replies, pointing to someone just outside the bubble and behind me.

“I’m sorry, what?” I ask, my eyes widening and my mind already conjuring all sorts of terrifying images. “I am okay with most things, there isn’t much that freaks me out but ironically, dead things that move when they should be dead really do freak me out.”

The guys all stare at me like I am the crazy one.

“Do you realize how hypocritical that makes you?” River asks, looking amused despite the situation.

“Yes, I do,” I reply honestly, nodding my head. I know that, but it doesn’t mean that I can change the way that I feel about it.

Actually, it is probably because of the fact that I die and come back to life that I am scared of moving corpses in the first place.

“Bullshit,” my inner voice practically cackles, “you watch too many zombie movies and freaked yourself out.”

“Bitch,” I curse at her. It’s not until the guys raise their eyebrows at me, that I realize that I have said that aloud and not in my head. I wave them off, “Don’t mind me. I’m just arguing with my inner voice, it’s perfectly normal.”

River bursts out laughing. “I think we may have a different definition of normal.”

“Everyone has a different definition of normal to Neith,” Van smiles affectionately.

“Rude,” I reply, with my own grin plastered on my face.

I know he is joking, I know he didn’t mean anything by it, but I can’t help the initial sting of his words. I am not normal and most of the time I am one thousand percent okay with that, but after just coming back from the dead, and having the voices still present in my mind, I would like to be normal. Or at least not feel like I am going completely and utterly insane.

I have been through enough shit in my life that there is a very real possibility that my mind has broken and created the voices. There is a possibility that they aren’t real, and that scares the shit out of me and makes me murderous all at the same time.

Murderous because if my mind is broken and I am crazy, I know exactly who is responsible. I feel murderous whenever I think of him though, so that doesn’t really change anything.

“ And hurt,” my inner voice mutters, she sure has a lot to fucking say at the moment.

I growl and shut that shit down immediately, it does no one any good dwelling in the past, and that is where that shit needs to stay.

Forever.

“Guy’s, we really should do something about the moving dead bodies because they are definitely moving now,” Griff interrupts my downward spiral.

I grimace, my nose scrunching as I look at the twitching bodies, “Maybe they are reacting to something and aren’t actually reanimating?”

My suggestion is disproven when one of them sits up.

“Okay, not that then,” River replies, whispering even though they can’t hear us. At least, I don’t think that they can.

I move closer to the edge of the now see-through bubble, trusting that Ransom’s magic is going to hold and that none of them are going to grab my ankle or try to eat me or something equally terrifying.

“There is no light in their eyes,” I mutter.

“What do you mean?” Evander asks, coming to stand next to me. He studies the one that I am looking at, the one that is just sitting there, staring straight ahead. “Okay, I see it. It’s like the lights are on, but no one is home.”

“Exactly,” I reply, happy that he can see what I do. “Like they are just shells with nothing inside, no soul.”

“Let me see if I can see their spirits,” Raiden says, a hint of apprehension in his tone.

He still thinks that I am going to freak out on him or judge him for being a Reaper, and I think it is going to take him a while to see that isn’t the case. It’s obvious to me that it isn’t just the reputation that all reapers have that is causing this reaction in him, he clearly has shit in his past that has hurt him deeply.

I find myself growing angry at the thought, feeling protective over this man that I have only known for a few days.

“There isn’t anyone home, none of them have any souls, but I’m not sure if it’s a new thing or if they were always that way,” Raiden says with a frown, his magic fizzing out.

“I think they had their spirits when they first came through the portal,” Doc says, “their shouts sounded panicked when they realized that it was closing and creatures with no spirits don’t feel things like panic.”

“Good point,” Raiden frowns.

We watch in silence as they all get up.

“We should probably go out there, we need to round them up or something and get them transported to the lab. I would like to see exactly what has happened to them and whether their spirits can be returned to them, that sort of thing,” Doc says, interest sparking in his eyes.

Evander nods, “You got it, Doc. Ransom, bring the barrier down. I think we have had it up for too long anyway. Winston said that we needed to bring it down before we gained too much attention.”

I frown. I forgot that he said that. We have definitely had the barrier up for longer than we should have, and now I’m worried about Ransom, and the rest of them actually, gaining attention from the sick fucker that is creating the hybrids in the first place.

There isn’t really anything else that we can do though, we can’t leave it up indefinitely, so we have to take it down and hope that Winston was wrong or that no

one has noticed.

The barrier drops and I am immediately hit with the sense of wrongness. It's in the air; it's permeating the forest. It is covering everything, saturating the surrounding area and everything in it.

River's nose wrinkles, "This all smells wrong. Really wrong."

"I can feel it, my magic wants to put the barrier up again," Ransom replies, his gaze slipping over to me for reasons that I am unaware of.

Griff's fists clench, as his skin ripples with the first sign of his shift before it calms again, "My gargoyle wants out, it's not safe."

When he speaks, his voice is harsher like rocks tumbling down a mountain, and it does something to me that makes my eyebrows rise and my thighs clench before I manage to control my reaction to him.

Holy damn. That made total sense. I stand by that sentence, but only because I am still dealing with the after-effects of his voice.

Doc's muscles are tense as he moves up onto the balls of his feet like he is ready to fly into fight mode at a moment's notice. "There is no desire coming off them at all. Every single living thing has some kind of desire running through them at all times, a desire to eat, sleep, move."

"Those things count as desires that you can feed from?" I ask curiously, distracted despite the situation.

Doc smiles, and nods, but keeps his attention on the bodies surrounding us, "Yes, they are all small forms of desire, but they are always there, present in all living

creatures. It's why it is easy for us to survive, desire is everywhere. We need a big hit to truly stave off the hunger. It would be impossible to survive on these small desires alone."

"You said living," Raiden points out, "they aren't living. They all received wounds that killed them, they all died."

Doc hums thoughtfully and nods, "Yes, I think you are probably right."

"Let's call Ty and get some backup out here. I don't like the way that they are just standing and staring into space," River says. "Do you think that they are even aware that we are here?"

"I have no idea," I reply because no one else does.

"Hey Ty," Evander says, and I listen to his side of the conversation as he asks for backup, says that the other agents are dead, and gives a very quick run down of the situation.

"You didn't tell him about me," I say, a question in my voice.

Evander shakes his head, "No, I didn't."

That's it, that is all he says on the matter. If I know Evander, if he is anything like he used to be, then he is going to want as much information as he can possibly get, before he does anything. If he does anything.

"What did he say?" Raiden asks.

"They should be here in ten," Van replies.

Magic suddenly builds in the air, and the guys all fall into defensive crouches, as I do the same. That isn't magic that I recognize and it is too soon for it to be the help sent from Ty.

I watch in horror as the bodies start to melt. That is the only way that I can think to describe it. Flesh falls off them in wet clumps, landing with a squelch that has bile burning my throat as I force it back.

"Oh god," I mutter.

It just keeps sliding off them, first skin, and then bloody muscle underneath falls to the floor with a plop. The smell is rancid, rotting, but more. I have been around more dead bodies than anyone should be, and I have seen them at varying states of decomposition, and none of them smelt like these do right now.

I can't help it, I gag and bring my hand up, covering my mouth and nose with the long sleeve of River's shirt and breathing through my mouth. The smell is still there, it's still rancid but thankfully I can at least control my gag reflex now.

Within moments, we are surrounded by bloody skeletons, their organs having followed the rest of them and landed on the floor in bloody heaps. Suddenly, they all collapse, landing in a heap of bones on top of their quickly blackening flesh, and then everything is suddenly alight.

This is no natural fire; this is a fire of magical means, and it feels almost coerced. I don't know how the fuck fire can feel coerced, but it does. At least to me.

"Fuck," Griff curses, "we need to get out, the fire isn't only burning bones, it's spreading."

"I can hold it back for a short amount of time, but I can't hold it back for very long,"

Evander says as his magic flares to life. Scales ripple across his corded forearms as he blasts water at the flames.

“They are magical flames; it’s going to eat everything in its path and quickly!” Doc replies, “You are strong but not strong enough to fight a magical fire of this size by yourself.”

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:02 am

Neith

Evander nods once, listening to Doc and conceding that he is right. That reaction is definitely different from the Van that I knew, his pride would have taken over at that moment and his stubbornness. I am glad that he has learned to listen.

We don't waste another moment as we all turn and head back the way we came. Normally I am a fairly decent runner, I have to be in my line of work, however I am currently running on empty thanks to going to see the Darkness, otherwise known as Friend. Either name suits it if I'm being honest, but it's only when I am actually in the Darkness that I tend to call it Friend, I don't know why. My point is that I am running on empty, I am already exhausted, and running is very quickly expending the little energy I have left. This probably isn't going to end very well for me. I don't really know what other choice I have though, it's not like I can say to the guys, 'sorry, I'm too exhausted to run, you guys go ahead, and I'll just let it burn me to a crisp.' Death by fire is not a nice way to go, especially magical fire, that shit just burns differently. Plus, even if I were willing to do that simply because I am too tired to run anymore, I have no idea what would happen if I died in such quick succession and without properly recovering in-between.

And I have no desire to die again.

With all of that in mind I'm going to have to pull up my big girl underwear and carry on going. I may be running on fumes, but I am sure as hell not a quitter.

I have once again gone off on a tangent that I had no intention of going off on, and it takes me a moment to refocus my thoughts and get myself back on track. It's only

when I feel the heat at my back that I remember.

There is a magical fire that is chasing after us and will easily burn us to a crisp in a matter of seconds if we are not careful.

“It’s gaining on us already!” Doc yells, running behind me and helping to propel me forward because I don’t want to risk slowing him down and causing him to end up in the fire.

“It’s moving faster than any magical fire that I have seen before,” Ransom yells back, not sounding out of breath at all, the bastard.

“I think we are nearly back to the van now,” Reed says.

I really hope he is right because I have black things floating in my vision now, and my head is starting to feel light. I don’t know how long I am going to be able to stay upright for, there is a good chance that I am going to pass out, I can feel it begin to come over me, encroaching on the edge of my vision. I just hope that I am going to be able to last until we get to safety, for the obvious reason, but also because I don’t want the guys to view me as a liability because I die so easily. I would be mortified if they told me they couldn’t have me on their team because I had a propensity to die too regularly.

Digging deep, I manage to find a tiny sliver of more energy and hold onto it with both metaphysical hands.

Finally, I recognize the path that will take us back to the lot, and I spot the small break in the trees that leads into it. I let out a relieved breath. Movement in the corner of my eye catches my attention, and I turn my head slightly to see what it is that has gained my attention. I’m worried that one of those reanimated corpses somehow survived the melting and burning and is now coming after us.

Watching that happen will definitely make an appearance in my nightmares tonight.

Thankfully, when my eyes finally focus on what has caught my attention, it's not a freaky ass zombie, but the giant moose that was among the animals that helped me to get to the guy's place a few days ago after the last time that I died.

I think Winston said that his name was Wallace, and his showing up here is not a good sign, not at all.

I might be in worse condition than I thought I was.

It occurs to me that I lasted a lot longer on barely any energy after the last time that I died. I know I was in bad condition when I finally got to the guy's place, but it took me a while to get to that point. I'm starting to think that the spirit guides that accompanied me were doing more than just walking with me and encouraging me to stand when I fell.

I owe them even more than I thought I did, and I am going to have to find the best way to thank them.

I hear the jingle of keys and pull my gaze away from Wallace to see that Van has the keys in his hand, which strikes me as odd because we have Doc with us, so isn't he just going to zap us out of here? My mind is too fuzzy to come up with an adequate reason for why he has the keys, so I abandon that line of thinking entirely. I probably won't even remember to ask later.

"Thank fuck," Van says as we break through the trees into the lot and see that back up has arrived. Van looks at Ransom, "Help the mages counter the fire. I will help the elementals and water users hold it back. Everyone else liaise with the rest of the agents and fill them in on what happened."

Everyone disperses, and since I am new to the team and have no idea what to do in this situation, I move over to the van, trying to remain as casual as I can and not give away how badly I am struggling. Even if I weren't struggling right now, I would still make sure that I am out of the way. I worked with HID for a long time, but I was never a part of a team, so I don't know what my role in this situation is supposed to be.

Finally, my heavy feet get me to the van, and I lean heavily against it, desperately trying to keep myself conscious. It would be really embarrassing if I passed out and made a scene in front of all of these agents. Not a great first impression, especially since I am human and therefore, they all think of me as weaker anyway.

"Not human," my inner voice reminds me although even she sounds exhausted and is lacking her usual sass.

It is by sheer fucking stubbornness that I stay upright and aware as I watch the agents work like a well-oiled machine, and within no time at all, the magical fire is out, and all that remains is the charred forest. My heartbeat slows and my eyes droop as I try to keep them open, the guys are all talking to the other agents no doubt trying to fill them in on what they need to know and what they should be looking out for when they go through the forest.

The world tilts, and instead of landing on the hard gravel of the lot, I end up leaning against something soft, not really having gone very far at all.

"I've got you," the familiar voice of Wallace echoes through my mind.

My gaze is still on the guys, and I see Raiden stiffen as his gaze finds mine. His eyes are swirling magic, but I can still see the fear in them as they widen. He says something, although I have no idea what he says or who he says it to. All I know is that he is coming for me. The relief I feel is almost overwhelming in its intensity, and

I know that I shouldn't be feeling this much for him having only known him for a few days.

"He is yours," Wallace says into my mind, but it makes absolutely no sense in my current state, Raiden is not mine.

A heaviness covers my entire body, and I struggle to hold onto any thought that tries to form in my mind.

The only thing that is keeping me anchored is Raiden, and his beautiful eyes.

"Neith," Raiden says as he gets within a few feet of me.

His voice sounds like he is at the end of a tunnel, and I frown. I have the overwhelming need to be in his arms, which is really odd because he hasn't even hugged me.

"You are in a bad way child, he is a powerful reaper, maybe one of the most powerful that we have ever seen although he is not aware of that yet. He will anchor you," Wallace says into my mind again.

I don't need to be told twice, although I am already starting to forget what Wallace has told me, it's like trying to grasp hold of sand in a sieve and it's not working.

Using the very last of my strength, I practically launch myself away from Wallace and have a fleeting moment of panic that I am going to land on my face, but I shouldn't have worried, Raiden is there, I don't know how he got to me so quickly, but he is there. He wraps his arms around me, his knees bending slightly as he lifts me. My head lands on his chest, and as soon as I hear the steady thump of his heart, I know I am going to be okay.

I know I am safe.

It is an unusual feeling.

Raiden

“I have you, Neith,” I mutter almost silently.

My eyes are on the spirit animal that is still standing near the van where Neith just was. I have no idea how I got to her as quickly as I did, but right now is not the time to question it.

“What’s wrong with her?” Evander asks, panic edging in his tone, as the others all arrive at the van too.

“I’m not sure but judging from the presence of the spirit animal, I’m not sure it’s good,” I reply, my voice tense as I stride toward the van. We need to get out of here, we need to head back home, we are too exposed out here, she is too exposed.

I don’t like it.

“Let’s get her in the van, I can check her in there,” Doc says, his gaze flitting around at the people still around us and getting on with their jobs.

At least, that is what they are supposed to be doing. A fair few of them are watching us and trying to be stealthy about it. Most of them have looks of shock on their faces, Neith voluntarily came to me, she reached for me, and I will be damned if my heart didn’t skip a fucking beat because of it. People don’t turn to me for comfort, they are scared of me, or they want the infamy that comes with being able to say that they fucked a reaper and lived to tell the tale.

It gets tiresome.

I am not letting go of Neith any time soon and I think that the guys sense that because they aren't trying to take her from me, despite how worried they all are. As I move to step around the moose that is still here for some reason, it nudges my arm.

My instincts tell me that it wants me to touch it, and although I have a sense of urgency riding me hard to get Neith in the van so that Doc can look over her and help her, I also know that it would be incredibly foolish to ignore the request. Spirit guides are extremely fucking rare and revered because of it. It is an honor that one of them wants to talk to me.

Yet, I still hesitate, the only reason I decide to pause is because the spirit obviously cares about Neith, and he was supporting her before I got to her, it might know something that could help her.

I stop, and keeping Neith held tightly against me, I manage to turn my hand just enough that I can touch his flank.

"Raiden," the voice of the spirit speaks into my mind, strong and rich. It's powerful and all-knowing.

I try not to let my surprise show when he mentions my name. "Can you help her?" I ask. I am aware that I probably should be more respectful in the way that I speak to him, I am sure that there was a title that I should have called him, but my mind has gone blank, the only thing that I can think about right now is Neith.

"I cannot," he replies, and I feel my heart sink. "But you can."

"What? How?" I ask. "Whatever it is, I'll do it."

It occurs to me that the lengths that I am willing to go for Neith are extreme considering the amount of time that I have known her, and I can't explain why I feel this way for her, I just do. I know without a shadow of a doubt that if there were a choice between my life and hers, I would choose hers. It terrifies me, but I can panic about that realization later.

"You need to be her anchor," he explains. "Neith did not get the sustenance that she should have gotten when she came back from the veil, she is close to crossing over again, and she cannot so soon after being there. Simply hooking her up to an IV won't be enough this time. She has gone back too soon after she was last there."

"Fuck," I mutter. I will come back to that later because that means that she died recently, and that definitely needs to be discussed, although I have a good idea when it was. Helping her and making sure that she doesn't cross over again now is more important. "How do I anchor her?"

"Let your magic guide you," he says, and then adds knowingly, "all of your magic."

I gulp. Fuck. "It's the only way?"

"Yes," firm, and blunt is the reply that I get as the moose disappears.

"What did he say?" River asks, his eyes are frantic and his body worryingly still, River is never still.

He cares about her as well.

"In the van," I say stiffly.

I suppose I did say that I would do anything for her.

Dying would be easier and have less consequences.

“What is it?” Reed asks gruffly, his eyes narrowed and calculating.

We all take our seats as Evander jumps in the front and starts to drive away from the crime scene. There are too many agents around, and Doc can’t just transport us like he usually would, or it would raise too many questions. Van will drive until we are a safe distance away, and then Doc will take us home.

“She needs to be anchored, or she is going to die again. She can not pass over so soon after being there,” I explain.

“Why do you look like you are about to freak the fuck out,” River asks, studying me closely.

Out of all of the guys, he knows me the best, although I will admit there is not much difference between what he knows and what the others know, that small difference is enough, though.

My hands clench as I pull her closer, my magic is already keeping an eye on her spirit, and it is fading fucking quickly.

“He said I needed to let my magic guide me, all of my magic.” I mutter, my eyes darting down to look at her because I can’t look at them. They all know how hard it will be for me. They know why I keep that side of me locked down. It is why I am still a tier-five reaper when I could easily be higher. If I allow that side out, I am going to get summoned, I am going to have to step up and I am going to have to face the trauma that I locked down with my gift. Something that I have avoided for decades, ever since I was a child. An accident that not even my parents know the full extent of. The only people who know about the other side of my magic are the men in this vehicle, and even then, they don’t know everything.

It didn't seem important to tell them everything because I was never going to use it. I now wish I had filled them in when I had the chance because I am out of time.

"Fuck," Doc mutters. "It's okay, Raiden, we can figure something out. Let me scan her, and I can see what I can do."

"Doc's right, brother," Reed agrees, with no judgment in his tone at all.

"We can help her without you needing to tap into that magic," Evander agrees.

River comes to sit next to me, his hand smoothing the hair off Neith's forehead, he looks at me with understanding and acceptance in his eyes. He nods, "It's okay, Raid, we've got this. We will figure it out. She wouldn't want you to use something that makes you so uneasy, you know that."

I was almost sure that I was going to do it for her. Still, hearing all of my brothers, my chosen family, say those words, all accepting and none of them pressuring me or judging me, letting me know that if I can't do this, that's okay, and that solidifies my decision.

My heart thrums in my chest, nervous, actually I am more than nervous I am fucking terrified, but beyond that is a slight thrum of excitement too.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:02 am

Raiden

“I’ve got this,” I say.

Shock covers all of their expressions, and I don’t blame them. I never intended to use that magic again. I made my life more complicated by not using it, I had to train harder both at the magical academy and the SID training academy to prove that I was good enough. I am strong without it, but there were a lot of other people that I had to hide my magic from; none of them would have understood why I didn’t want to use it. My lack of magic was also a huge disappointment to my family, my father mainly, and yet not once through all the berating and shitty words that they threw my way did I even consider showing them what I was really capable of.

But Neith needs me, and it's as simple as that, it wasn’t really even a decision. As soon as the moose said that was what I needed to do, I knew that I would do it. I wish I could explain why the decision is so easy, and why I am willing to do something for Neith that I have never even considered for anyone else including myself, but I genuinely have no idea.

Doc frowns, “You really don’t have to Raiden.”

“He said that what we did last time wouldn’t help this time because she has died again too close to dying before. She hasn’t had enough time to recover fully, and if she dies again now, which is going to happen if I don’t anchor her, then it is going to be bad, really bad,” I explain what the moose said to me.

Their expressions cloud with worry as they all grasp the seriousness of the situation,

and the realization that she died recently. I am sure that they are all connecting the dots about when she last died.

“We need to get inside the wards,” Ransom says. “They should stop the council from summoning you.”

I nod in agreement although if I’m being honest with myself, I am not sure that even Ransom’s wards could stop the council from feeling the power surge and summoning me. Right now though, it doesn’t matter, only she matters, and I will deal with the consequences of what I am about to do after I have saved her.

“Fuck it,” Doc says suddenly, “Van, is there anyone else on the road?”

“No,” Van says and then suddenly slams the breaks on as we appear outside our house. “Damn man, you could have given me some warning.”

Doc frowns, “Sorry, my magic is coming a bit quicker than it usually does.”

“It’s her,” River says.

None of us reply to that, none of us really know how, although I am pretty certain that none of us will argue with him.

She arrived in a whirlwind and, even in such a short amount of time, has turned our world upside down. I have a feeling that it is only the beginning.

“What do you need from us?” River asks.

I shrug, I don’t really know for sure, I do know that it wouldn’t be good if it happened in here. “I just need to be under the stars.”

We all climb out of the van and the guys start asking me questions but it's like the second that I stepped out she stopped trying to hang on.

"Fuck!" I curse. "She's going."

"You do what you have to," Evander says. "We've got you."

I nod.

I can't do this slowly and steadily; I don't have the time. Her spirit is leaving, and her heartbeat is slowing.

"You need to stand back," I say. The guys hesitate, sharing a look. The lock is already loosening on my other side, almost like it knows who I need it for and what I need it for. The power leaks into my voice, it comes out deeper, full of darkness and light, and commanding, "Now!"

Their eyes widen as they all move back.

"Fucking hell," Doc curses.

I ignore them and take a deep breath. The moose said to follow my magic, and so as hard as that fucking is, that's what I do. I tear away the lock that is holding back my other side, my other magic, and it blazes forward. My shift is instant, my reaper bigger and stronger than it has ever been, and I look down at Neith, still cradled in my arms. My eyes burn with magic, my back searing with pain before what I instinctively know to be wings burst free.

That's a new one.

I grasp hold of my magic, feeling whole for the first time in maybe forever, it comes

easily enough, happy to help and I get a pang of sadness spear my heart. I don't have time for any of this though. My magic picks up on what I want, and it quickly sets to work. It wraps itself around her soul, tethering it to her body with a golden thread, and another thread tethers to me. I frown slightly, I don't know why but I don't think that was supposed to happen.

My magic swells, as it builds the tether, and then with a sharp snap clicks into place. She is not going to be crossing over any time soon. When she is healed enough, the magic will dissipate, that I know instinctively.

Although the task is complete, I take a moment, breathing deeply and reveling in the peace and freedom that having all of my magic free is giving me. The memories are staying at the edge of my consciousness for a moment, and I appreciate that because I know that they aren't going to stay there.

All too soon, I admit to myself that I need to pull my magic in and lock that side of me away again so that I can get Neith inside. She needs rest, and I am starting to think that she needs food too, and lots of it. Reluctantly I pull it back and force it back into the cage that I created for it. It doesn't want to go, and I don't want to put it there, but I manage it. My wings retract, my eyes stop burning, and that heaviness settles back over me, feeling impossibly heavier now that I have felt what it is like to be free.

When it's finally in there, I am hit with a wave of sadness. The only thing that helps right now is the weight of Neith in my arms and the fact that I helped her. My magic helped; it didn't hurt.

Slowly, I turn to face the guys. I frown when I see them way further back than they were.

"What are you doing all the way back there?" I ask, and then fear spears me. I

wonder if they are that far back because they fear me.

Evander grins, “You pushed us this far back with your magic.”

“All of you?” I ask, my eyes on Reed.

He nods, “I moved with the others to a safe distance, but you didn’t move me. I think you could one day though.”

My eyes widen, holy fuck.

River rushes up to me and then bounces around, my eyes barely able to trace his rapid movements, “Dude, that was fucking epic. I mean, your other magic is insane.”

I allow myself a half smile, more for River’s benefit than for my own, as I stride toward the house, each step feeling like it weighs a ton. Allowing my magic free was far easier than I ever thought it would be after all of these years. Putting it back, however, was extremely hard, and I hadn’t realized how much it was dragging me down having it confined.

All I can hope is that it gradually gets easier because if it doesn’t, I don’t know what to do.

“You never told us you had wings,” Doc says, watching me closely.

“I didn’t know I did,” I reply honestly as I gently place Neith down on the same couch she was on only a few days ago. I am incredibly grateful that she is in better condition now than she was then. As I finally drag my eyes away from Neith, I catch Reed and Doc sharing a look. “What?”

“You do realize what tier your wings will make you?” Doc asks me.

I tense, and they all see it. “Yes, I am aware. They won’t find out.”

“Raiden, we need to talk about if,” Evander starts, and I just shake my head.

“Not now, please,” I say and then add with a level of honesty that I can only have with my brothers, “it's too raw.”

Evander immediately nods, “Okay, you got it. Let me know when you are ready.” He changes the subject, “I am assuming since you are no longer panicking that it worked, and she is tethered?”

I let out a relieved breath, grateful that he is not pushing the subject. I know that the conversation about the council, and my tier will have to be spoken about at some point, but I do not have the mental capacity to have that conversation right now.

I nod, and then explain what I intuitively know from my magic, “Yeah, she is tethered, the tether will fade when she is fully healed and back up to where she should be.”

“Do you have to feed magic into it to keep it strong or anything like that?” Ransom asks curiously, his eyes darting between Neith and me.

I shake my head, but my eyebrows pull down slightly, “I don’t think so. I got the impression that once it was done that was it.”

Ransom’s eyebrows raise, “That’s some pretty fucking strong magic, dude.”

I grunt.

“It’s impressive,” Griff adds, a smile playing around his lips. He obviously knows that it is making me uncomfortable again though, because he changes the subject.

“Are we going to assume that she is going to wake up absolutely ravenous?”

I nod, but before I can say anything, Reed does, his power leaking into his voice, “She died before she came here and was nearly dead when she arrived.”

“We need to wait and let her explain what happened,” River says, sitting down on the couch next to Neith and picking her feet up. He places them in his lap like he has done it a thousand times before.

His eyes connect with mine, and I can see the shadows that have been left behind after watching Neith die, ones that I have no doubt are in mine, too. I never want to go through that again. I can’t.

“You’re right,” Griff agrees, “I am going to order food. Van what pizza does she like?”

“Erm, pepperoni, mushroom and black olives, extra cheese,” he replies immediately.

I smile, yeah, you don’t remember the pizza order of someone who you haven’t seen for over ten years and was only a friend.

We have always known that though.

Her being a part of the team, under our protection and also living here, is going to make more than a few things complicated. However, I don’t think any of us want her anywhere else.

She is very much a part of us now, and I am kind of terrified to think about what it is going to be like a few months down the line if she has affected us this much in only a few days.

I know one thing for sure: she represents change and significant change.

Neith

I sit up, my eyes still closed as I sniff the air like I am deranged.

“I told you she would wake up as soon as she smelt the pizza,” Evander chuckles, and I pop my eyes open.

“Pizza?” I ask curiously.

Doc smiles as he hands me a large pizza box and then points to the spread on the guy's large coffee table, “We got lots of sides, help yourself.”

I smile gratefully, but that is about as far as my thoughts get because my focus is on the food. Standing up from the couch, I settle on the floor, open up the pizza and add all the sides that I want, which is of course all of them, to the now flattened lid.

“That’s brilliant,” River exclaims, sitting next to me and doing exactly the same.

He moves with such fluid grace, crossing his legs with an ease that such a giant man shouldn’t have. It fascinates me but not enough to take my attention off the food for very long. The guys clearly learned from last time because a second one appears as soon as I finish my first pizza, and I smile gratefully up at Griff.

I didn’t wake up with an IV line in me, and I was very definitely fading, yet all I currently feel is hungry, really fucking hungry but only that. I glance around the room at the guys, they must have done something because I nearly slipped into the Darkness again, I was sure of that. It has also only been a couple of days since I died the last time, although it feels like a lot longer, and now that I am really thinking about it, I don’t think I have ever died in such quick succession before. Maybe that’s

why I ran out of steam so quickly and could feel the Darkness tugging on me again.

So what happened while I was out for the count, and how did they manage to do something that stopped the Darkness from taking me? I instinctively know that even though I died a few days before and not straight before my second death, it still wasn't great that I died with very little time between deaths, and I was in a really bad way.

I take a breath and focus inward, trying to see if I can somehow feel what happened, tilting my head slightly as I find a familiar magic, definitely not mine, I don't have magic, or maybe I do? I am still not ready to confront that either way.

The magic is comforting to me and fills me with warmth. My gaze lands on Raiden, who is distracted by his food. It's him, it's his magic, and I know that without a shadow of a doubt. I frown as something niggles at my mind, something that Wallace said about Raiden; at least, I think that is what I am trying to remember, but as soon as I believe that I have grasped hold of the memory, it slips from my grasp again. No matter how hard I try, the memory just slips further and further away. I'm clearly not supposed to remember it, so I let it go.

It makes sense in a way that he was the one to help me since I was dead and he is a reaper, although I will admit that at first, I thought that it was Doc who had helped me, since he is the doctor in this group.

I am extremely curious about what he did, but I know that if I bring that conversation up now, then they are going to think that it is go time on the conversations that I know that they want to talk about, and I need more pizza before that happens.

They are being very patient, I know that they have questions, and I kind of love that they are letting me eat before they ask me anything. Of course, that might be because Evander has told them stories from our childhood about what happens if I don't get

food or get interrupted before the hunger has been satisfied. Whatever the reason, I am grateful.

They last until I am halfway through my second pizza before they start the conversation.

“Okay, I can’t keep it in any longer,” River suddenly exclaims from beside me, and I glance up at him. “You died.”

“I did,” I reply, because there really is no point in trying to say otherwise, I had a knife sticking out of my chest. It pierced my heart, no one could survive that.

“But you are alive,” Griff adds, as a statement and not a question.

“Yes, I am.”

“Neith,” Evander says, pulling my gaze over to where he is studying me closely, “did you die before you came here?”

I sigh and put down my slice of pizza, “Yes.”

There is a rumble of growls that echo through the room and send a thrill through me. I'm not even sure who is growling, I just know that it's more than one of them and I strangely like it.

“I think you had better start from the beginning, Love,” Doc says, his eyes filled with anger already.

I'm not focused on that at all though, he called me love. I know it doesn't mean anything, but it still makes me feel all warm and fuzzy and since the following conversation isn't going to be warm and fuzzy at all, I'm going to enjoy this moment

for a short while longer.

“Neith?” River asks curiously.

I hold up my hand, “Give me a second.”

“What is she doing?” Ransom asks.

I watch Evander shrug and then smirk, “If it’s the same thing she used to do when she was a kid, then she’s committing something to memory.”

I melt, “Aw, you remembered.”

“Of course I did,” Van replies with a slight frown like he is confused about why he wouldn’t have remembered something like that about me.

It may not mean a lot to him and may seem like a small thing to remember, but to me it's huge, and it means something.

“Neith, you were going to explain how you died?” Reed’s voice rumbles through the room, his patients clearly running thin.

“Okay, so you know how I said that HID tried to kill me and bopped me on the head and then abandoned me, blah blah blah,” I start to explain, my hand waving dismissively in the air.

The guys just stare at me incredulously before Raiden nods and answers, “Yeah.”

“So, I may have fudged the details because it sounded insane and I had no idea if you guys were going to help me, and I can’t take down the corruption at HID by myself, and I also needed help to hide, and I didn’t want you to be like nope, that sounds like

too much hassle fuck off,” I ramble, I know I’m rambling and yet there is fuck all that I can do about it.

“Erm,” River starts, but I interrupt him because I’m on a roll now, and there is no stopping me.

The voices have gained volume again and seem to be excited about something, although I, of course, have no idea what the fuck they could be excited about. If it’s because they think that I am about to mention them to the guys they have another thing coming because there is absolutely no way that I am going to be doing that. There is already enough crazy about to be explained, and whereas the dying and coming back to life can be explained by magic, especially now that I am apparently a supernatural, that’s getting easier to think now, the voices aren’t as easily explained, I have done the research and no supernatural creature has voices that behave like mine.

I won’t be telling them about the voices because there is a very real possibility that I am crazy.

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Neith

“So yeah, I couldn’t really risk telling the truth, although now that you know that I died, you’re probably going to hate me anyway,” I carry on my rambling.

“Neith,” Evander starts.

I wave my hand and interrupt again, “Yeah, yeah, okay I will start from the beginning. So, the heading to a job and falling asleep was true, and a rookie move on my part. I woke up, and we were on this deserted stretch of road. The road was blocked off by cars that were similar to the one that I was traveling in. The driver cursed and tried to reverse, but we didn’t get far before we got hit with a bazooka. Obviously, I died. When I came back, the Darkness was clinging to me still, and I was aware of what was going on around me but still very much dead,” I look at Doc, “Even if you had examined me with your magic, it would have told you that I was dead.”

I don’t want to explain how I know that it’s a story for another time and actually one that I hope I never have to tell.

“I, what?” Doc replies.

I continue where I left off, hoping that they are all keeping up, “I can still hear when I am in that state though, and that is when I heard them talking about the guy that they take supes to, and I recognized the voices of the agents that were speaking. They said he would be disappointed that I wasn’t a supernatural because they were all convinced that I was. So they threw my body into the woods, alongside the driver

who was very dead. They then got on with the clean up, and I stayed as I was until they had finished it. When I was finally able to move again when the Darkness had decided that the threat to me was over, I woke up and realized that a bear had eaten the driver and that it was centimeters away from my face, I managed to back up and find Betty, and took the shot, but the fucker swiped me before I could kill him, and then I walked here.”

I debate telling them what usually happens after I die because then that is going to invite more questions about how often I have died and how it happened, and who did it, and some of those deaths I haven’t dealt with yet. It would also take a long time to explain because I die a lot. So, because of all of that I decide to keep it to myself unless they ask, and then I won’t lie to them.

For some reason, in my mind that makes it better.

“A bazooka,” Raiden growls, his eyes flashing with anger and his jaw clenching. He looks hot as fuck, and looking at him reminds me.

I point at him, “What did you do to save me?”

His eyes widen.

“How the fuck could you possibly know that he did something, you were practically dead,” Doc questions. I have a feeling that question is going to be the most straightforward question that he is going to ask me.

“I can feel his magic,” I explain and pick up another slice of pizza.

Everyone is staring at me, all of their expressions are arranged in some form of shock, as they react to what I have just told them. I may look like I am chilled out and calm, at least on the outside, but on the inside, I am a raging ball of nerves. I am

calculating how quickly I can get out of here if their reaction is bad. I am also eating more because if they do decide that they are done with me and kick me out, I have no idea when I am going to be able to eat next.

Having said that, I do have that little black card that has a lot of money on it. If I can get the money out before they freeze the card, then that will be a massive help in the 'keep me hidden and alive' plan. I wonder if I can convince them not to tell Ty, just to say that we didn't work out after all, and then I can carry on working and not dying. I mean, I haven't actually done anything to them apart from lying, so there is a possibility that they might want to rid themselves of me but acknowledge that I am not a danger.

I hope that is the case anyway, and then Betty and I can just get on with it like we always have, just the two of us.

I gasp, interrupting whatever it was that Raiden was going to say, "Betty!" understanding dawns on all of the guys faces, "Please tell me that one of you managed to grab her?"

They all shake their heads, looking apologetic. It's evident to anyone with half a brain how much Betty means to me.

"Sorry, Neith. I think we were all too busy running to find her," Ransom apologizes.

"I can't believe I left her," I mutter, feeling far more sadness than I probably should, considering she is a gun. The thing is, she has been with me since the year after Evander went to the magic academy, she has saved my life more times than I can count, and in a life where everything is up in the air and unsure, Betty is my only constant. "Maybe I can go back tomorrow and see if she is okay? She might be."

"She was right in the middle of the magical fire," River says gently.

Before I can answer, there is a thump on the couch behind me, and I spin around to see what made the noise: “Betty!”

I grab her and pull her toward me. I am aware that I look completely insane, cuddling a gun, but I was about to spiral downward, and we still haven’t dealt with the whole I died thing because I once again managed to derail the entire conversation. Which will probably be another reason that they decide to get rid of me. They will at least be able to have a normal conversation without me around.

“What the fuck?” Raiden exclaims.

“That gun just came out of nowhere. There was no build-up of magic, nothing,” Griff says. He narrows his eyes, “Didn’t you say that you didn’t have any bullets in her when you managed to shoot that hole in the wall in your bedroom?”

I wince, “Yeah, I’m still sorry about that, by the way.”

“Don’t worry about it, I’ve already fixed it,” Ransom says, waving away my concern. He focuses back on Griff, “You’re thinking that Betty isn’t a normal weapon.”

“Where did you get her?” Van asks me.

I frown, as I try to think of where I got her, I know how long I’ve had her, but the details on how I got her are a little bit fuzzy, a hazy memory finally manages to push to the forefront of my mind, “I think I got her from a little antiques shop in a town that I was staying near at the time.”

“You think?” Raiden asks.

I nod, “Yeah, my memory is a bit hazy. I just know that I have had her for a decade.”

“She showed up just after I got into the magical academy?” Evander asks, quickly connecting the dots and the timeline.

I nod, “Yeah.” Looking around at all the contemplating faces I ask, “You guys think that she is an enchanted object?”

“I’m not sure whether I would say enchanted, but I think she might have magic of her own,” Ransom says.

Reed shakes his head, clearly in disagreement with Ransom. “Not necessarily. It might be Neith. We have no idea what kind of supernatural she is. She could be making the bullets for Betty, and she could have called the gun to her a moment ago. She could have even put some kind of protection on it without even realizing that she had done it simply because she feels protective of it.”

Ransom nods, his eyes narrowing slightly as he thinks over Reed’s alternative option, “You know I would be more inclined to believe that than I would to believe that Betty herself is enchanted. An enchanted object is rare, and I don’t think I have ever heard of a gun being enchanted before.”

“I think you guys are focusing on the wrong thing right now,” Raiden says, “I mean, it’s fantastic that Betty is back, and it’s weird because she was definitely in the magical fire and should have been burnt to a crisp, I get all of that, but Neith just told us she got blown up with a bazooka and died.”

“It fucking hurt,” I mutter.

The room becomes so quiet that you can hear a pin drop, and they all stare at me, absolutely horrified.

“You felt it?” River asks, his voice a whisper.

I shrug and nod, “Yeah. Just because I come back doesn’t mean that I don’t feel the pain of dying.”

Reed’s magic flares, “You . . .”

He shakes his head, anger flaring in the depths of his eyes before he storms out of the room. I look around at the guys in confusion.

Van shakes his head, “Don’t worry. He just isn’t used to people putting him above themselves.”

That is all the explanation that he gives, and I am pretty sure that is all I am going to get no matter how much I ask, that’s fine I will just ask Reed what is wrong when he gets back.

“Is there anything else that we should know?” Doc asks, concern etched into his features.

I shrug, “Probably, but I don’t know what.”

He smiles, “How are you feeling? We nearly lost you again, and the moose led us to believe that would have been very bad.”

“Wallace,” I grin.

His eyebrows raise, “Wallace?”

“The moose,” I explain, my smile widening.

Understanding flashes across his features, “Ah, okay. You didn’t answer my question.”

“Yeah, I’m good. Whatever Raiden did worked well. I actually feel better than I did last time after I came back,” I reply, only just catching myself from saying better than I usually do.

Raiden winces, “I’m sorry that you can feel it. You aren’t supposed to, but then you don’t quite conform to any of the usual rules, so I should have guessed that it would affect you differently. If it weren’t a life-or-death situation, I would have asked.”

His eyes practically beg me to understand, but I have no idea what it is that he wants me to understand. In the end, I decide honesty is the best policy because he is getting more nervous by the second.

“I’m sorry, but I have no idea what you are apologizing for,” I say honestly. “You saved my life.”

“Yeah, but you can now feel my magic,” he winces again.

“Yeah, I can and it’s all warm and comforting. It feels a bit like I imagine home would, a true home, not a make do one,” I explain and then widen my eyes, “sorry, that was really weird wasn’t it.”

Raiden’s smile is broad, his eyes lighting up with stars, “Not weird at all.”

“Thank fuck,” I yawn. “What’s the plan for tomorrow?”

“A rest day,” Evander says before anyone else can say anything, and I don’t miss the looks that they give him. He carries on before I can question him, “Did you manage to get anything ordered for yourself?”

“Food?” I ask curiously, and my eyes widen, “Oh my fuck, do you guys have a dessert place around here that delivers?”

The guys burst out laughing, although I am not sure why. This is a pretty serious situation.

“We do,” Griff confirms, his usual stoic expression on his face but a twinkle in his eye.

“Can we order?” I ask excitedly, my butt wriggling where I’m sitting.

“Fucking hell, she’s adorable.” Doc chuckles, he pulls out his phone, presses a couple of buttons, and then hands it to me, “Here, Love, get what you want.”

“Yes! You are my favorite today,” I grin.

“Again!” River exclaims. “How do you keep getting her favorite?”

“I’m just that good,” Doc replies.

I’m too absorbed in picking out desserts, and yes, I am picking out multiple because I have never been good at limiting myself to one thing, so I answer.

“I bet you are,” I reply, the implication clear in my voice. It’s not one of the worst things that I have said. It would have been okay if I had left it at that, but unfortunately, my mouth has other ideas, “I bet you could make me scream in the best way.”

As soon as the words register, I glance up from the phone, as several groans sound around me, and I find myself the subject of heated gazes.

Doc surprises me the most though, because he crouches down next to me gripping my chin as he makes sure that I am looking at him.

“I wouldn’t just make you scream, Neith. I would make you beg. I would bring you to the very edge of oblivion and pull you back until you were screaming my name,” his voice is like a warm caress, seductive and full of promise. I have absolutely no doubt that he is capable of what he is describing.

My body heats, desire flooding my system, his eyes flash gold as he takes breath, and his fingers tense on my jaw—surprise flares in his eyes when I bite back a moan, and my desire spikes. I have always liked a little pain with my pleasure.

My voice comes out breathy, “Promise?”

He gulps.

“Doc,” Evander says, a warning in his tone.

Doc’s thumb rubs along my jaw, his eyes flaring liquid gold again, his voice comes out sounding like pure sex as he leans closer, his lips brushing my ear as he whispers, “I promise, Love.”

Just like that he is gone, standing up and moving away from me, back to where he was standing before, if it weren’t for the remaining heat in his eyes and the watchful gazes of the others, I would have thought that I had imagined it.

I take a deep breath, I want him, I want him really fucking bad. I would accuse him of using his succubus mojo on me, but he is just as affected as I am and even if he had I wouldn’t have cared, the attraction was there before anyway. He didn’t use it on me though, and I know that without a doubt, because of my instincts, they would have let me know if his magic was being used.

I let my eyes dip to the straining bulge in his jeans, lick my lips and then return my attention to the phone in my hand, a smirk playing on my lips.

I give as good as I get.

“Does anyone else want to order something?” I say as I look up from adding the last thing that I want to the basket.

River clears his throat, “Sure, I could do with something sweet after that.”

I chuckle. It turns out that they all want something, so the phone gets passed around them all.

“What about Reed, should we order something for him?” I ask.

“I have already put his favorite into the basket. He’s going to be pissed that he missed that show you two just put on,” Ransom replies, his eyes sparkling with heat.

I snort, which is attractive, “That wasn’t a show, that was barely a preview.”

“Damn,” Raiden smirks. “You really are trouble, aren’t you.”

I shrug, I am, and for more reasons than my love of good sex. I shouldn’t be playing games with them. It’s not going to turn out well for any of us. Even though I am one hundred percent certain that the sex would be fucking mind-blowing. Especially if I could convince a couple of them to let me be the filling in a man-wich.

“Yum,” I mutter.

“What?” Evander asks.

I point to the phone still being passed around, “Just thinking about dessert.”

Van raises his eyebrow like he doesn’t believe me in the slightest but shakes his head,

this whole conversation got derailed pretty fucking quickly, and if he questions me further, it's just going to happen again.

“Before you successfully took the conversation in an entirely different direction, I wasn't referring to if you had ordered dessert,” Evander says.

“You weren't?” I ask, my eyebrows furrowing.

Van sighs, “No, I was referring to your clothes situation.”

“Oh,” I reply, “you know actually that makes more sense now that I think about it.”

“Well?” Van asks, when I don't immediately answer.

“Oh, no I haven't got anything yet, I need a laptop so I can order some stuff. I am getting pretty low on stuff now, so I probably need to nip into a town or something to get a few essentials,” I admit with a grimace.

“Why the look?” River asks curiously.

“I fucking hate shopping, it makes me cranky,” I admit.

Evander chuckles, “Some things never change. We have to write up the reports tomorrow, if you are feeling up to it, and then we can head back into town.”

I nod, “That would be great, I only have the essentials. If I can borrow someone's laptop then I can order the rest of the things I need online.”

“Got it,” he replies.

That sounds like a good plan. I'm not too fond of shopping but I should be able to get

everything I need in one store depending on the size of the town, and it's not like I need anything fancy. I am tired, really tired, but not only do I now need to wait for my desserts to be delivered, but I also want Reed to come back.

I don't like the way that he suddenly disappeared, and I can't help but feel like it was my fault. Like I did something wrong.

I don't know how long I sit listening to the guys pick apart the plot holes in a TV show that they have put on before I get up. There is a need riding me hard, I need to find Reed. The trouble is I don't know where he is, and I don't want to ask the guys where he is because he probably wants to be left alone. I need a distraction.

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Neith

I can't just sit here though, because I'm feeling twitchy, and those thoughts that I have been putting off are starting to circle and demand attention. As always when I am in this frame of mind, I need to move.

"Are you okay?" River asks me.

I smile, "Yeah. I'm good. I just need to stretch my legs. Maybe clear my head a bit. A lot of shit has happened over the last few days. Hell, even just today, and I think I need some time to process everything."

Understanding flashes across his expression, "Yeah, I get that. Do you want some company?"

I shake my head, "Not this time, but put a pin in that, I definitely want to take you up on that at some point."

"Deal. The grounds surrounding the house are completely secure, apparently the only people who can get past the wards and all the security we have is a beautiful women who has a penchant for dying and who brought half the forest worth of animals with her when she arrived," River replies with an amused smirk.

Beautiful. That's what he called me. What is it with these guys and making my heart skip a beat?

"Are you sure that you are going to be okay?" Raiden asks, looking worried.

Normally, I would come back with something snarky, but it must have been pretty traumatic watching me die, and Raiden has saved my life, I know that on an instinctual level. I am also aware that he is being cagey on exactly how he has saved my life, but if he doesn't want to tell me, then I'm not going to force it, I am just grateful that he did whatever he did.

It's for all of those reasons that I react without my usual snark, "Yeah, I don't know what you did, but it has worked, and I feel almost back to normal. I promise that I won't go off the property, and I can shout really loud, so if something happens, you will hear me."

Griff frowns, "Why would you need to shout? Can't you just call one of us?"

I chuckle as I stand up, "Well, my grumpy friend, I could if I had your numbers or a phone."

"Oh," Griff replies with a frown and then pulls his phone out of his pocket, "take mine. All of the guy's numbers are in there, if something happens, or hell, if you just can't be fucked to walk back and want one of us to come and pick you up, call."

My heart skips a beat, and I move over to him, taking the phone and then wrapping my arms around his waist and hugging him tightly. His arms wrap around me, holding me close as his cheek comes to rest on the top of my head. I close my eyes and allow myself to enjoy the moment. I am quickly coming to realize that Griff gives the best hugs. They make me relax, and I could honestly stay here, cocooned in his arms for hours, and not feel the inclination to move. My need to move and walk has calmed, and my mind has quietened. It's like magic, but the reaction that Griff's hug causes in my body, the safety that I feel in his arms, is not good. It's not what I should be feeling for my teammate and, hopefully, friend.

I reluctantly pull away and tilt my head up to smile at him, "Thanks, Griff." Handing

him Betty, I add, “Look after her for me.”

He nods but doesn’t say anything. Instead, he takes a seat in the big armchair and rests Betty on his lap.

“We will call you when your dessert comes,” Evander adds.

“If you eat it, I will cry,” I reply, and then with a sharp smile, I add, “while beating you violently.”

“Why was that hot?” River asks, looking around at the rest of the guys.

“I have no idea,” Raiden replies, his heated eyes skimming down my body and leaving a trail of heat in their wake.

I tuck Griff’s phone in my pocket and then turn on my heel, heading for the front door and leaving them to it. I should probably go shower and change. My shirt is covered in dried blood, and I am still wearing River’s shirt over the top, which he is absolutely not getting back. However, my need to escape is really riding me hard, and it has quickly become my most important need. As I open the front door, cold air blasts me in the face, cutting through River’s shirt and making me shiver. My leather jacket is all the way up in my room, and I really can’t be bothered to go all the way upstairs to grab it. This house is enormous.

To avoid having to go up the stairs because I really am that lazy, I glance around the entryway to the house, grinning when I see a row of jackets hung up. I pick the one that looks the warmest, hoping that whoever it belongs to doesn’t mind that I have borrowed it, and pull it on before I step outside.

It’s huge, but the wind is cutting, and as I zip it up all the way to my chin, I am extremely grateful for the extra warmth that it provides me. Glancing from side to

side, I decide to head to the left of the house and the forest that stretches beyond. The trees should provide me with some shelter from the wind, and I definitely need that.

My eyes quickly adjust to the darkness, and I shove my hands into the deep pockets, trying to keep them warm. I allow myself a moment to enjoy the peace. I have always felt at home in the dark, and it has always comforted me. I guess that it's probably because of the Darkness, my friend, and my safety, and it does keep me safe in situations where I definitely wouldn't be otherwise. I know that it is a bit of an oxymoron that somewhere where I go when I have died keeps me safe, but it does, and it has proven that time and time again.

Even before my first introduction to the Darkness, I loved the dark. Evander always said that I was crazy when we were kids, but I was always more comfortable in the dark than I was in the light.

The forest quickly swallows me, the light from the house disappearing, and I take a deep breath. The voices have clearly gained their strength back as they are at their usual volume, but even they become a hum rather than a nuisance as I move further into the woods.

This is what I needed, somewhere to think, and just like that, the thoughts pour in.

I have spent my entire life wishing, hoping, and practically begging any one of the gods that happens to be listening for magic. For a supernatural side. My whole life I have felt out of place, like I don't belong, I have needed magic or something more, so many times in my life and now I'm told that I am a supernatural and have been all along.

Told by someone that I see as family.

Anger tries to rise at that thought, but I bat it away, there is no room for that, I know

Sully, and if he could have told me, he would have. It does no one any good being mad at him for something that he had no control over.

It does pose another question though; Sully is a strong supernatural, and yet someone managed to put a strong enough spell on him that he couldn't override it. That makes me wonder why. What kind of supe am I? Where are my parents? Sully kept referring to them in the past tense. Does that mean that they are dead? A part of me hopes that they aren't, and yet there is another part of me that thinks it might be easier if they were, as awful as that sounds. If they are alive, I have to face them, ask them why they abandoned me, why they gave me to Evander's parents.

I would have to ask them why they didn't love me enough to keep me.

My barriers slam closed; I am definitely not ready to think about that.

If I am really being honest with myself, I am angry. My life would have gone in a completely different direction if I tested as a supe, I could have avoided a whole lot of trauma, and pain if I could have gone to the magic academy with Evander, but that didn't happen. I am a big believer that everything happens for a reason, but I am struggling to see the reason behind that.

Why did I have to go through a life of pain, only to find out in my thirties that what I wanted all of my life I have always been?

I work through all of these feelings, sorting them, feeling them, and then releasing them. This is a massive life-changing thing, and I need to deal with it as adultly as I can. That means not burying everything that this situation is making me feel. I am not a complete grown-up, so the feelings that I have toward my parents are being buried until I am better equipped to deal with them, but any anger I have toward Sully and Van's parents gets felt, and then I move on.

They were all doing the best that they could with what they had. Sully has protected me and guided me as best as he could, considering the people that I ran with, and he is family, he is my big brother, and I don't know what I would do without him.

Van's parents took me in when I had no one, I know that they did it for my parents but they loved me, they didn't just look after me, and they never pressured me to be more than I was, they just loved me as their own, I have a good childhood because of them.

None of those people deserve my anger, so they aren't going to get it.

I have never been very good at being patient, but I don't have a choice. Sully's words were that it's starting, or at least something along those lines. I am hoping that he will be able to tell me more at some point, but with the way that Fates work, several things most likely have to fall into place before that can happen.

I am now confident that my Darkness, and the fact that I die and then come back to life as me with no change or need to feast on brains, is part of my supernatural side. However, I have done extensive research, and I haven't come across anything that came even remotely close to what the Darkness is or anyone that can do what I can do.

I have no idea how long I have been out here, my mind going around in circles and trying to pull apart all of these feelings, but my legs are tired, and I need to sit down before I head back to the house, and hopefully dessert. I spot a fallen tree and take a seat on it, making sure that I am not about to sit on any living creatures.

The forest at night is alive with more life than people usually give credit for, and if you stay still enough, all manner of creatures will make themselves known to you. I take a moment, allowing thoughts of being a supernatural, and family ebb away, I just listen to the forest around me.

It's not long before I have remained still enough that the creatures start to make themselves known again, I watch as a deer slowly moves through the trees, only briefly stopping to look at me curiously before deciding that I am not a threat and moving on. Rabbits do a similar thing, and I just watch. I become aware that I should probably start heading back to the house since I have no idea how long I have been gone. I want my dessert, and I also don't want to make the guys worry and think that something is wrong with me, again.

I start to stand up but pause when I get the overwhelming feeling that I am being watched, my instincts ping with warning, and the forest quiets. I am supposed to be safe out here, the guys said so and I believe them. However, this is me, and my previous track record shows that if there is even a whiff of danger in the immediate surroundings then I will find it.

It's a gift.

I allow my gaze to move around the forest, turning in a slow circle, my hands clenching and unclenching as I ready myself for an attack. I have nearly completed an entire circle when I spot eyes in the tree above me, just two small dots of glowing purple, but they are definitely eyes. As soon as I lock eyes with it, and it acknowledges that I have, the creature moves into the moonlight and swings down from the branch, landing in a soft crouch before straightening again.

If I am not mistaken, I am staring at an imp. A creature from the supernatural realm of Trieneliea, it's where all supernaturals come from. It is infinitely vast, and rumor has it that it has access to other realms as well. We don't know much about the realm. I know that there was a war and that the war is what triggered many supernaturals to escape to this world. We also know that when they did, the gates that connected their world to ours were closed, and despite their best efforts, they were still unable to open them.

I know more than most about what happened, Sully likes to talk about home when he has a little too much to drink. I don't know much though, I know that it was different than Earth, but the same, when I questioned him about that, he didn't explain, just carried on talking. It was harsher, split into territories for the various supernaturals and their desired realms. Wars broke out, but nothing compared to the scale of the last one that forced mass evacuation. I asked about hierarchy, the governing system, all of that sort of thing because I was incredibly intrigued by the place that he spoke about with such fondness, he just waved me off and said that was enough talk of the past.

I bring it up every now and then and only ever get a small amount more information out of him. I wish I could study the place, but there are no books on it here, only stories that have been passed down from the generation that left. Supernaturals live for a very long time and there are many that are still alive from that time, although it only happened forty odd years ago so that isn't really surprising.

The shuffling feet of the imp pulls me out of my thoughts, and I study it. He only comes up to my mid-thigh, if that. He looks like a small, perfectly proportioned human, except his skin is tinged a dark blue, and his ears are pointed, although they are only just visible through the blue and silver threads of his braided hair.

He smiles, rows of sharp, pointed teeth making his smile look anything but friendly. From what I can remember, they aren't usually supposed to be a threat and are more known for their trickery. My senses are telling me otherwise though, and that warning that danger is near is still thrumming through me. It would not be a good idea to let my guard down.

"What do you want?" I ask it, because the way that his purple eyes are looking at me, he definitely wants something.

There is a rustling in the trees, and small figures drop from their branches. I find

myself surrounded by at least fifteen imps.

Shit.

“We don’t mean you any harm,” the one who first dropped from the canopy answers my question.

“I would believe you, but you have me surrounded,” I reply, with more bite than I probably should have.

His eyes widen slightly while the other imps all start to move restlessly.

He tilts his head and studies me closely, “Name.” He demands, and when I just raise my eyebrow at him because who the fuck does he think he is, he dips his head and adds, “My name is, Flinotive.”

“That’s an unusual name, although I suppose it’s not where you come from,” I reply, my words once again causing the imps to shuffle around and mumble. Since he gave me his name and I can’t remember anything in the lore that I have read about imps that would indicate that I shouldn’t, I reply, “Neith, my name is Neith.”

He nods a wide smile on his face again, “Yes, yes. I thought so, but I had to check. We have been waiting a long time.”

“Waiting for what?” I ask.

“You must complete a task,” he replies, ignoring my other question.

I raise my eyebrow again, “I must do nothing, actually. Besides, I don’t have time to complete a task, I have dessert calling my name.”

“Flinotive hears no one calling for Miss,” he replies, looking confused. His confusion clears, “No matter, you must complete the task.”

The danger warning that I have suddenly goes from a mild buzzing to a blaring siren, and the world around me shifts and changes as magic builds around me. When the world finally stops spinning, I find myself in the forest still, but nothing is the same, and I have a feeling that somehow, I am not in the forest at the guy's house anymore.

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Neith

The trees are bigger, a lot bigger, these are rivaling redwoods in their size, and as I crane my head backward to look up, I realize that some of them are even bigger. There were definitely no redwoods in the forest surrounding the guy's house, and although these trees are similar in height, that is where their similarities end, there are ones that have a similar shape to oaks, birches, and elm trees, but all with that insane height.

That's not the only difference, it is night still here, which I am grateful for because it means that I have shadows to hide in, although it does mean that other creatures have shadows to hide in too. As I was saying, it's night here, or dark, I know nothing about this place that I have ended up in, it could be nighttime here all the time. Through a break in the trees above me, though, I can see two moons, one red and one blue.

They are really pretty, and although I want to study them closer, I know that I can't right now. I have more important things to focus on, like finding out where the fuck I am and why I am here.

Lowering my gaze, I find Flinotive watching me curiously and wringing his hands nervously. He should be fucking nervous.

"Take me back," I demand, my voice a growl. I wish I had a weapon of some kind. Any will do.

Flinotive shakes his head, "I can't. I am sorry. You must complete the task."

I take a threatening step toward him, but he just disappears, reappearing a few feet away.

“Take me home,” I demand again, my fists clenching as my panic starts to rise.

“I am sorry. I can’t, even if I wanted to, you are here now, you must complete the task if you wish to get back home.” He explains.

Unfortunately, I hear nothing but truth in his words, and my shoulders slump. For fuck sake, why is it always me that gets myself into these situations?

“There is no other way out?” I ask, just to clarify, he shakes his head. Resigning myself to the situation that I find myself in, I ask, “What’s the task?”

The imp grins his unsettling smile once again, “It’s quite simple deary, there is a door that leads back to the forest, it will only be open for the next three hours, find your way back.”

He disappears in a flash of glittering magic, and this time, he doesn’t reappear anywhere else.

“Son of a bitch,” I growl, and then yell at the trees in case the imp is still nearby, “that’s it?”

A rustling in the trees next to me makes me realize that I need to keep my voice down. I am in unfamiliar territory with absolutely no information. I don’t know what could kill me here, hell, everything could fucking kill me here. I can’t stay where I am, the imp said that I had three hours, which concerns me because it is such a long time, and they are unlikely to make it easy for me since this is supposed to be some kind of test. To me, that means that it isn’t just going to be a simple case of getting to the gate, not that I thought it would be anyway, since I am simply not that lucky. No,

this so-called test is going to throw other things at me, too, and knowing my luck, they are going to be deadly.

A test for what I have no fucking idea, but right now, I couldn't give a fuck. It's a test that I need to pass, if I don't then I am going to end up in this realm permanently. The guys will never know what happened to me and most likely assume that I ran off or something as equally ridiculous. I will probably get eaten in this realm, I may have a supernatural side, but it doesn't really give me many advantages apart from the dying and coming back to life, that is a pretty big fucking advantage, but who the fuck knows if that works here, and I am once again faced with the fact that I have died recently and I can't die again so soon, I have a feeling that if I do, it will be permanent.

I undo the giant jacket that I am wearing as I walk in what I am hoping is in the right direction. It is considerably warmer here than it was in the forest near the guys, so I have definitely moved location. Not that I was really questioning that, the completely foreign flora and fauna that surrounds me proves that easily enough.

Shit.

I could smack myself; I may not have many advantages in my supernatural armory, but I do have a few tricks up my sleeves, one of which is that I can find things. It's how I found the guy's house, my gift kicked online, and it showed me a freaking map to the place. The problem is, it is very temperamental. I have asked it to work for me many times over the years, and it has just refused, not even an inkling of an idea of where the thing that I am searching for is. It did work to find the guys though, and that was a life-or-death situation, I could argue that this is very definitely a life-or-death situation too, so maybe it will work again.

As I take breath, of the sweet-smelling air, keeping my senses alert and on my surroundings, it occurs to me that this is probably what everyone else considers

magic. It's just that mine rarely works and if it does work it rarely works as it should. It does make me wonder why I just assumed I wasn't a supernatural because of some tests and didn't take into account the things that I can do that humans can't and that would be considered magic.

"Come on," I mutter aloud. I just need help to find the doorway back to the forest and the guys.

A mental map glows to life in my mind, and for a moment, a split second, I think that I can see hundreds of doors all spread out over a vast area, and area bigger than I can truly comprehend, but it disappears, and I am left wondering if I imagined it. The map changes, and I see the path that will lead me to the door that I need to escape.

Fuck, it is so far away from where I am, and I now know why the imp gave me three hours; even with that amount of time, I think I am going to push it to get there.

I kick the pace up into a run, the map is still in my mind, ready to call on should I need it, but when it comes to things like this, my memory is pretty fucking awesome, and I shouldn't have to look at it again.

Whoever's jacket I am wearing, billows behind me as I run, and as much as I wish that I could take it off, I can't risk leaving it here and some sort of nasty locking onto the scent and somehow finding the guys back at the house. That would not be good. I keep running, keeping my breath even, and tapping into the side of me that I use when I go on a job.

Now that I know that I am a supernatural, it occurs to me that I have been tapping into it for as long as I can remember. Or, well, at least since after Evander left. I wonder if the timing is significant. I definitely tested as a human in the test for the magical academy, and I know that they had the real deal. Now that I know that the humans didn't though, it makes me wonder if I would test positive as a supernatural

now on the real test and if it would be able to tell me what I am.

My foot squelches down into something soft and I am almost too terrified to glance down and see what it is that I have stepped in, I have to though.

“What the hell,” I mutter as my boot seems to be covered in some sort of purple goo. It wouldn’t normally make me pause, but something makes me stare at it for longer than I usually would, considering it’s something that I have stepped in. I am damn grateful that I did as the goo starts to eat through my boot, and I begin to panic. If it’s eating through my boot that quickly I dread to think what it will do to my foot. Images of the melting corpses from earlier flash through my mind. No thank you.

I stop and bend down, desperately trying to get the boot off without it touching my skin. I manage it just in time and throw it to the floor to get rid of it quickly. Of course, in true me fashion, some of the goo on my boot splashes up and lands on my foot, I wait for the pain, wait to yell, but it has absolutely no effect on my skin whatsoever.

Huh.

Maybe it’s inorganic material that it eats, man made things? I know that I can’t continue with one boot, and as risky as it is to go barefoot in an unknown place, it will slow me down considerably if I have to carry on with only one boot. I also don’t want to carry it, which means I get to test my theory about the goop only eating man made things. Look how that worked out.

“You realize that you are trying to trick yourself . I know that you really just want to play with the goop,” my inner voice points out, and I ignore her.

I take off my other boot and sock and drop them into the puddle of goo, being entirely consumed by the goop clearly speeds up the process because my boot and sock have

been entirely consumed within thirty seconds. My gaze falls to the jacket, it really is massive and slowing me down, and I briefly contemplate throwing it into the goo just to get rid of it. The problem is, it might be one of the guy's favorite jackets, and I would feel fucking awful if I was the one who ruined it, so despite the fact that it would make my life easier, I keep the jacket on.

I want to drop more things in the puddle and see what happens, but I have three hours to get to the door, and I don't have time to drop things in puddles.

Damn it.

I wriggle my toes cautiously on the ground, testing to see just how much this is going to hurt my feet. I spend most of my time barefoot, and that includes walking outside, so my feet are hardier than most, but I am not entirely immune.

Thankfully, the floor is relatively soft, and I should be okay so long as it stays this way. A fizz of magic has me tensing, and I see a set of numbers appear just in front of me, they aren't very big, maybe half the size of my finger, but they are glowing. It only takes me a moment to realize that they are counting down and that I only have two and a half hours remaining to get to the gate.

Where the fuck did that first thirty minutes go?

There is no time to dwell on it now, and I once again set off running, following the mental map in my mind. I jump over tree roots and move through the giant trees with an ease that quite honestly shocks the shit out of me. I'm not going to question it though, if I do I risk it suddenly not working for me.

I really fucking wish I had a weapon with me. Something tells me that Betty would do next to no good here. I usually carry a knife or something on me, but I can't find anything in the usual places on my outfit, and that is curious in itself because I know I

brought some with me when we left the house to go and check out the distress call from those agents.

A growl has my head snapping to the left, and I honestly don't know what the fuck I am looking at. I guess the most similar creature I can compare it to is a person, but it's not, and it is nothing like the imps or any of the supernatural creatures that I have ever seen before. Its arms are nearly as long as its body, and its long, sharp, clawed hands are nearly dragging on the floor; it runs with its legs bent, but its knees are bending backward and not forward as normal knees do. It is also such a deep black that if it hadn't growled, there would have been absolutely no chance that I would have seen it, as it blends into its surroundings seamlessly.

Its head is relatively human-shaped, but that is where the similarities end. The creature's mouth stretches from one side of its bald head to the other and is filled with razor-sharp teeth; it opens its mouth, snapping it in my direction and allowing me to see that it has more than one row of those deadly-looking teeth. It has a mouth full of them. And horns, the fucking thing has two twisted and deformed-looking horns protruding from the sides of its head, just above where the flaps for what I am assuming ears are.

Just as I think that I have got a grasp on what the thing is, I see a fucking tail. Covered in deadly spikes. Fantastic, that's just what I fucking need. I glare at the still glowing little timer.

"This is your fucking fault," I blame, just because I am mostly freaking out, and I need something to take it out on.

My words anger the creature, and it leaps for me, I barely manage to dive out of the way in time and my hair whips around me in the wind that it creates. Shit. I run as fast as I fucking can, but I can feel it moments behind me, and I know that there is no way that I can outrun it to the door. My mental map is already showing me that I am

too far away, the creature is moving too quickly.

I am going to have to fight, my problem is I don't have a fucking weapon. How am I supposed to fight against this creature with no weapon?

I carry on running.

I don't get very far, though, as weight knocks into me from behind and sends me flying through the air. I am grateful for the giant jacket, despite the extra bulk that it means I have been carrying around because it means that I have a somewhat soft landing as I hit the ground and roll, narrowly missing the claws as they strike the ground where I just was.

It comes after me quickly, and all I can do is roll on the floor, avoiding each strike. There isn't enough time between attacks for me to get up, and the creature is frantic in its desire to end me. I manage to sit up, launching myself backward as he strikes the floor again. While its claws are stuck in the ground, I strike out with my foot, hoping that I can do enough damage to slow it down.

That may have been the case if it weren't for the fact that I was barefoot. It hisses; all I have exceeded in doing is pissing it the fuck off.

Great.

I am getting really fucking desperate. I'm going to die. There is no way out of this. Just as I resign myself to my fate, something glinting to the left of me catches my eye. I risk a glance and grin as I see a sword just lying there; I will question that at some point, I am sure, but for now. I am absolutely over the fucking moon.

I roll closer to the sword, grabbing the hilt and ignoring the buzz of magic that kisses my palm and travels up my arm. I love swords, they have always been my weapon of

choice, although they are entirely impractical for dealing with humans, and so I never replaced the one that I lost.

I swing in an arc, severing the arm that was coming for me, and grimace as blood splatters my face and clothes.

The creature screams in pain, but losing an arm doesn't seem to slow it down in the slightest, and it swings its other arm toward me, intent on maiming and killing me. I roll backward, sword still in hand, and manage to spring up to my feet. I have more of an advantage on my feet than I do on my back, on the ground.

The sword feels at home in my hand, and thankfully in this situation, the fact that I haven't fought with a blade for a couple of years makes no difference to the outcome, it doesn't require skill, I just need to kill it.

I have no idea what this creature is, I have never seen or heard of one before, and hell, I don't even know where the fuck I am, but a good rule of thumb is to cut off the head.

Since the creature has no arms now, it is coming for me with its giant mouth. I don't waste any time, I don't know how long it has been trying to eat me, but I know that I have to get to the door quickly. As it lunges for me, I swing my sword again, hoping that whoever left this here didn't do so because it was blunt and no good anymore. The blade sings through the air, making me smile as it slices through the creature's neck like it's fucking butter. Oh, I like this sword a lot.

The head falls to the floor with a heavy thud, the body quickly following after it, I kick the head as far away from the body as I can, and then do the same with the severed arms, just in case it can put itself back together. I have read about creatures that can do that.

There is no time for rest, I take off at a sprint, following the mental map and glancing at the glowing countdown clock that is still floating next to me.

Shit, I have ten minutes. That's it. There is a good chance that I am not going to make it, but I refuse to stay here and be eaten by one of those things. That just seems really fucking painful.

I don't dare let go of this sword, it has saved my life now, and that means that we are officially bonded, and it's mine. It's coming back to the guys with me, besides if I see that bloody imp there when I get back, I am going to need the fucking sword with me.

Finally, the door comes into sight. The only reason that I know that it is what I'm looking for is because my mental map is telling me, there is no physical door there, it's more like a vague shimmer in the air, kind of like heat rising off asphalt in the summer. I can see it, but it's still too far away for my liking, and I put on an extra burst of speed.

I am not alone.

Once again, I am being tracked and chased. Glancing to my left, I almost stop in my tracks, this time the beast looks like a giant dog, dark purple and black fur covers it entirely, huge, pointed ears are pinned back against its head and its muzzle pulled back in a deadly snarl. It probably reaches my shoulder in height, and it looks like it is built to fight, corded muscle, and powerfully bounding after me.

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Neith

It's hunting me. There is absolutely no doubt in my mind that is what it is doing, and yet I am reluctant to swing my newly found sword, I don't want to hurt it. I can't explain why, it is trying to kill me, snapping at my heels, and I had absolutely no problem with killing the long-limbed creature but for some reason, I pause in harming this one even though it seems just as intent on eating me.

I just need to get to the door.

It's still a fair way in front of me, and I get the shock of my life when a tall, dark figure steps out of the tree line. He is fucking hot, and I know I shouldn't be noticing that right now, but anyone would. His face is scared, he is easily the same height as Reed but slimmer in build, more like Ransom. Two perfectly formed horns protrude from his head, curving backward and not detracting from his appeal at all. This man is a fighter. That is easy to see. I want to study him more, but his purple eyes widen in shock as he spots me, and the door is closing. I need to leave.

Me being the smartass I am, I grin at him and wink. Everything that happens next happens in a whirlwind: the door is a few strides ahead of me, the beast launches and clamps down on my shoulder, and the man, if he even is a man, cries out in dismay. The clock ticks down to seconds, and I smack the beast on the nose with the hilt of my sword. It lets go, the growl cutting off abruptly, and I swear its eyes widen, but I don't have any time to do anything about it as I throw myself through the door just as it snaps closed.

That was too fucking close.

I lay on the ground, gazing up at the familiar trees of the earth realm. My shoulder is screaming in agony, but I can't relax.

I force my feet beneath me and push myself up, grateful that I still have my sword with me.

"Miss, did it," Flinotive says, his voice laced with awe. His eyes widen as he spots me, in all my blood covered glory.

I point my sword at him, "Walk. You are coming back to the house with me. You can explain to the guys that you had a hand in this and that I am not bat shit fucking crazy."

Surprisingly, he doesn't argue. He just stares, and his eyes widen when they see the sword. He turns and walks forward. Smart imp.

"How long have I been gone?" I ask, studiously ignoring the pain thrumming through my shoulder. I grip the blade in my hand tighter, a pulse of magic thrumming through it, before it dissipates, I don't know what it is, I don't know what it has done but the pain is easier to deal with, so I am not going to question it.

"Ten minutes, miss," he replies. "Time moves differently here to when you are there."

I nod, but I am not in the mood to speak, even though I know that I should be asking questions, all I want to do is get back. I want Doc to look at my shoulder, and I want my fucking desserts after I have showered the blood from that fucking creature off me.

The house comes into view a lot quicker than I thought it was going to, and either I came back closer to the house than when I left, or I didn't get as far into the forest as

I thought I did.

My sword is still pointed at the imp as I move to push open the door and then force him inside, he goes willingly.

“Neith, you’re back quicker than I thought you would be,” Raiden says, and I follow the sound of his voice into the front room to find all of them, minus Reed, and River, where I left them.

As soon as they spot me, they all jump up, looking at me in alarm until they freeze when their gazes land on the imp.

“What the fuck?” Griff curses.

“What’s all over you?” Ransom adds. Before yelling, “River! Reed!”

Reed arrives in a split second, but River doesn’t.

“That’s an imp,” he says, then gets a closer look at me, his eyes widening in shock.

“Before anyone says anything, he’s going to explain,” I start, glaring at the imp.

“Neith, imps don’t talk to other supes and even if they did, we wouldn’t be able to understand them, they don’t speak in our language.”

I shake my head, “He does,” turning to the imp, I say, “Tell them what you did, and where you sent me.”

“What the fuck,” Doc asks.

His expression is so shocked that it derails me for a moment, and I ask, “What?”

“You spoke their language,” Evander replies.

I shake my head, “No, I didn’t.”

“You did,” Reed says bluntly, and really, if Reed says that’s the case, then I have no reason not to believe him.

I shrug, I will deal with that in a minute, “Tell them, in a language that they understand.”

The imp stares at me for a moment before he nods, “As you wish.”

“It spoke,” Raiden says, eyes wide.

“It spoke our language,” Doc adds.

I sigh, “Thank fuck you can understand him.”

“We do not like to speak to outsiders but miss commands it so I will do as she commands.”

“Oh, now you fucking listen to my commands,” I growl at it, my hand clenching on my sword.

The imp grimaces slightly but does as I have previously asked and tells the guys what happened, “Miss had to complete a task, she had to get home, and I sent her to another realm.”

“What!” Griff exclaims.

“Had to be done,” Flinotive replies.

“Why?” Reed asks.

“That’s what I would like to know,” I reply.

Flin shakes his head, “Can’t say. Bye now.”

That’s it, he’s gone.

“Where the fuck did he go?” Evander asks, looking around the room to see if he is hiding anywhere.

“Probably back to the forest, there are quite a few of them living in there,” I reply tiredly.

“I have no idea what the fuck just happened,” Doc comments staring at me, his gaze runs over me, and he wrinkles his nose, “where are your shoes?”

“A puddle ate one and I sacrificed the other one,” I reply, wriggling my toes, and leaning on my sword, pointy side down.

“Where did you get the sword?” Raiden asks.

“I found it when I was about to be eaten,” I reply simply, then gesture to the blood that is splattered all over me, “I won.”

River chokes that moment to come into the room, his happy smile drops immediately as he drops the bags of what I am assuming is dessert on the floor and rushes toward me.

“You’re bleeding. Badly,” he says, his eyes wide with concern.

The others tense.

I frown and then nod, “Oh yeah, hang on.”

I start to lean the sword against the back of the couch but think better of it when I realize that it is absolutely covered in blood and grossness from that creature.

“Can you hold this?” I ask, looking at Reed, before I hand it over to him, I add, “She saved my life, she means something to me.”

He nods in understanding, I mean, really no one should be surprised that I have bonded with another inanimate object, not after the way that I treat Betty.

“Got it,” he confirms, but as he takes it from me, magic suddenly flares in the room, and I watch in shock as the sword zaps him.

“What the fuck just happened?” Raiden asks.

“You know we were saying that enchanted objects were rare?” Doc says drily, “Well it appears Neith has found herself an enchanted sword, and one that doesn’t like to be touched by others.”

I throw my hands up in the air, which in hindsight maybe wasn’t a good idea because I still have the sword in my hand and the bite in my shoulder that makes me hiss with pain, I growl and look at the sword, “For fuck sake, I can’t put you down because you are going to get blood everywhere so I have to give you to Reed until I clean you. Do you really think after you saved my life, I would give you to someone who I didn’t trust with my life, and therefore yours!”

“You trust me with your life?” Reed asks, his voice coming out weird, but I am too focused on the sword to check why.

“Duh. One second, I am having an argument with a sword,” I reply.

“I trust them, you trust them,” I tell it, and then add thoughtfully, “only them. No one else. If anyone else tries to grab you, do the zappy thing.”

The sword hums with magic in my hand, it feels like it is agreeing so I’m going to assume that it has worked.

“Erm, Neith,” Griff starts, and I glance up at him, “that’s not how enchanted objects work, you can’t just tell them not to do something.”

I frown, “I’m pretty sure I just did. It agreed.” I hold the sword out to Reed, ignoring everyone’s incredulous looks because I am very aware of how crazy it sounds, “Take it.”

Something in me softens even more toward the big hulking guy, when he doesn’t even hesitate, he just reaches out and takes it.

“Well?” Van asks.

Reed shrugs, “She’s right, it hasn’t shocked me, it’s behaving itself.”

I grin, “I have a way with inanimate objects. It’s a gift.”

“You have a way with enchanted objects that for sure,” Raiden replies, “and it very well may be a gift.”

River storms toward me, none of the usual bounce in his step or mirth in his voice. There is a distinct growl in his voice as he says, “She. Is. Hurt.”

The guys still, as their gazes move to River.

“Shit,” Evander curses.

I’m about to ask Van what is going on and why they all look so worried when River reaches me and scoops me up into his arms, being incredibly careful with me.

“River, I’m going to get grossness all over you,” I protest half-heartedly because being held by him has instantly drained the last of the tension out of me.

How the fuck did he do that?

The only response I get from River is a growl, which vibrates through me and goes straight to my clit, fucking hell, that was like the best vibrator I have ever owned. Now is not the time to get distracted, especially since the guys have become impossibly tenser. Glancing up, I see that River’s eyes are entirely his kitsunes, and extremely pretty, they are a mix of gold, orange, and red and glowing with power. I know that his shift is really close to the surface, and I am reasonably certain that the only reason why he hasn’t shifted yet is because he has me in his arms.

“What’s going on?” I ask since no one has said anything.

At the sound of my voice, River’s chest rumbles in almost a purr, and I find it strangely comforting.

“Well I’ll be damned,” Doc mutters.

I give him an unimpressed look as I ask again, “What is going on? Not that I mind being held by River because well, obvious reasons, but this doesn’t seem like he just wants to hold me? Plus, I am covered in blood and icky grossness from being in the, wherever the fuck I was, I still don’t fucking know.”

“Obvious reasons?” Raiden asks, a smirk playing around his lips. When I just stare at

him, narrowing my eyes to prove my point, he sighs, “It appears that River’s kitsune is having a problem with you being hurt, and didn’t like that we were taking too long to see to you.”

“Oh,” I reply. I’m not really sure what else to say. I feel like Raiden is giving me the simplified version of what is going on with River, but like everything else, I just leave it. I am sure that I will figure it out at some point, and if I don’t, I will forget about it.

“River, Neith is bleeding. Can I have a look at her and make sure that she is okay?” Doc asks.

I would be offended that he isn’t asking me if he can look at me, but I know that shifters, especially alphas can get a bit funny when they have been triggered. River is definitely an alpha and a damn strong one at that, which surprises me because of how laidback and bouncy he is, that, and he easily lets Evander be in control. I feel like I am missing something big again. The last thing we want is for him to get defensive, which probably won’t be good for anyone in this room.

River growls.

“That’s a good sign,” Griff says drily, and I smirk.

“Not helpful,” Reed grumbles, although there is no mistaking the flash of amusement in his eyes.

I sigh, we aren’t getting anywhere, I am tired, my shoulder is burning with pain now and I desperately need a shower.

I place my hand on River’s cheek, stopping him from glaring at the guys as his gaze immediately moves to me, his cheek nuzzling my hand and threatening to derail me

in the absolute cuteness of the act.

“River, babe, I really need you to let Doc look at my shoulder, I got bitten, and it hurts like a bitch,” I explain, hoping that I can get through to his kitsune and him since they are one and the same.

River stiffens and then dips his head to my wounded shoulder and inhales deeply, exhaling a vicious sounding growl that really shouldn’t turn me on, but it really fucking does.

“Shit,” Reed curses. “I really don’t want to have to take her off him. Not only is it going to trigger his fight response, which means both us and him could get hurt while we try to calm him down, but Neith could get hurt too.”

I don’t like the sound of any of that, so I know that I need to do something to try to diffuse the situation. The problem is I have no idea what. I try to cast my mind back over the books that I have read about shifters to see if I can remember anything that may help me. I think I remember that you are supposed to be firm with them, but then that could be that you aren’t supposed to be firm with them because they saw it as a challenge. I don’t remember, but it is all I have.

“River,” I snap, and he finally lifts his head from sniffing my shoulder. “I love that you are being all growly and protective, it’s weirdly hot, I will admit that, but I need Doc to look at my shoulder, and he can’t do that while you are behaving like you are, I’m in pain, Doc can fix that. Got it?”

River lets out a sigh and then strides across the room with me still in his arms, I sigh, thinking that he hasn’t listened to a word that I have said and that he is just going to carry me around for however long it takes for him to calm down, which I wouldn’t usually complain about, I mean there is something thrilling about being easily carried around by a man, at least there is for me, but my shoulder fucking hurts.

I'm just about to try again when River gently lowers us onto the couch, being careful not to jostle me, and then looks up at Doc.

"Fix," his voice is a rumble of a growl, more his kitsune than his human voice, and absolutely fascinating.

"Well okay then," Doc mutters. He wastes no time in summoning a bag that I am assuming contains some sort of medical supplies.

"Can't you just heal me?" I ask.

He glances up at me, surprised, "I can, I just assumed that you wouldn't want me to since it's not an emergency. Most humans find magic uncomfortable and don't like being healed when conscious."

"I'm not human though," I point out, saying it aloud for the first time feels strange and almost like I'm pretending so I add, "well, not entirely. There is a little supe in me. That's what she said," I snicker.

Raiden bursts out laughing while everyone else just looks amused. Evander shakes his head with a smile. It says a lot about the current state that River is in because he doesn't laugh at all, and I know that he would have found that just as amusing as me under normal circumstances.

I think.

Doc gains my attention again, his expression still amused, "As you pointed out, you are still mostly human, so I just assumed that you wouldn't like it. If you are sure that you are okay with it, then I will use my magic, but I still need to see the wound."

I nod, "Yeah, it's fine with me. I like the feeling of magic. I am going to need help to

show you my shoulder though if River isn't going to let go of me," River growls in protest, and I smile, "I guess that answered that. The bite is on my shoulder, if you could pull the jacket off my arm, then I can pull my arm out of it. You are probably going to have to cut my shirt to get at it."

Doc nods and he grasps the sleeve of my jacket and pulls, together we manage to get it off. I really wish that River's shirt that he gave me back in the golden bubble wasn't white when gasps and growls sound throughout the room and the magic level amps up, the guys all gritting their teeth but somehow managing to stay upright this time, under the onslaught of Reed's power, which I'm assuming means that he is holding the majority of it under wraps like usual.

"What the fuck, Nene," Evander is the first to speak, "why didn't you tell us that you were that badly wounded? We wouldn't have carried on asking you questions."

I shrug and then wince slightly as it jostles the wound, "I have a really high pain threshold, and I can compartmentalize really fucking well. I was fine, it's not life threatening."

"Don't do that again," Reed demands, and I raise my eyebrow, he adds somewhat reluctantly, "please."

"Fucking hell, she got Reed to say please," Ransom teases. His face becomes serious as he looks at me, "He is right, though he could have said it nicer, if you are hurt, please tell us, please don't stay in pain. It's unnecessary."

I nod, my eyebrows pulling together slightly, "Okay, I can do that. Just don't get mad at me if I forget."

"How could you forget that you are in pain?" Griff asks, sounding confrontational, but I don't think he means it that way.

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Neith

“I am not used to having anyone to tell. That’s going to take some adjustment,” I reply honestly.

It’s not a sad thing, it’s just the way that it has been for the past decade, and it isn’t going to be something that I can just give up so easily. I’m being slightly generous with the years, there were a few where I relied on Dimitri, before he proved himself to be truly psychotic. I don’t allow myself to dwell on that though.

“We won’t get mad,” Ransom says firmly as if he is daring anyone to argue with him. No one does. No one even looks like they were considering it.

“Neith, you were right, I’m going to have to cut the shirt off so that I can see your shoulder.” Doc starts to explain as he pulls out some scissors from his doctor’s bag.

Apparently, River isn’t too fond of that, and I don’t know whether it’s because of the scissors, or because Doc will be cutting his shirt. Either way, the whole room takes a collective breath as his magic builds, he partially shifts one of his fingers into a claw and slices the shirt from the collar by my neck, over my shoulder, and down my arm. He does it with such precision that he only cuts the fabric, and all I feel is the softest touch that makes my skin prickle with sensitivity.

The fabric near my neck and on my shoulder doesn’t move because it’s glued to me with blood, but the fabric on my arm falls away with ease.

“Did you know he could do that?” Ransom asks.

I glance up just in time to see Raiden shake his head, “No, I didn’t.”

“Me neither,” Van replies.

“He’s never behaved like this about anyone, though, has he?” Reed points out.

I stiffen slightly, and River’s big hand strokes along the outside of my thigh, soothing me until I relax again. I look at Reed and ask, “He hasn’t?”

Reed doesn’t reply verbally; he just shakes his head.

Oh. That’s a big deal, at least I think it is. Now probably isn’t the time to ask. While we were talking, or rather I was listening to them talk, Doc has got to work removing the shirt sides from the wound. It hurt, but I was able to block it out.

“Fuck, Neith, this bite is huge. If the creature had bit down any deeper or pulled, it could have taken your arm,” Doc curses, and all the guys refocus on my arm.

“I can’t believe that you were able to block the pain of that out,” Evander says.

“You don’t seem to heal like a supe,” Griff points out.

My laugh is somewhat sardonic as I reply, “No, I definitely don’t.”

“Sully said that it was just the beginning, so maybe that’s something that will happen when her supernatural side develops.” Ransom suggests thoughtfully.

I shrug, “Maybe. I sure as hell hope so.”

“What did it?” Doc asks as he continues to inspect the mark. “The bite is big, bigger than anything that I have come across for a long time.”

I frown, “I have no idea. I can describe it, but it wasn’t an earth animal. Like Flinotive said, he transported me to another realm somehow and then just told me that I had to get home. I ran into a puddle that ate my shoe, and I mean literally ate my boot and I couldn’t carry on running with one boot on, so I sacrificed the other one to the puddle too. Then this tiny timer showed up, all glowing and shit letting me know how long I had to get to the door that would lead me out of the realm, three hours by the way, that was how long I was there.”

“What?” Reed barks. “How is that possible? You were gone for twenty minutes maximum.”

“Flin said that time worked differently, and not as much time had passed here,” I explain and then continue my previous explanation because I know that they are about to ask me anyway, “then I got chased, well hunted by this creature that was really fucking disturbing,” I quickly describe the long-limbed, backward knee, all mouth and teeth thing to the guys.

“I have never heard of a creature like that,” Evander frowns.

“Something about the description jogs a memory, but I can't quite place it, leave it with me and I'll see what I can find,” Raiden says thoughtfully.

“That’s what bit you?” Doc asks.

I shake my head, “No. That was chasing me and I thought that it was the end. It was too fast, and I had no weapons on me. It knocked me over, and I spent ages rolling around, missing its claws as it tried to pierce me, and then I saw my sword just lying there. I grabbed it and sliced off one of its arms, hence this mess because I was still underneath it,” I gesture to the yuk all over me, “then I managed to stand, but it was only momentarily distracted. I took its head and kicked it as far away from the body, just in case, and then I had to run to the door because I wasn’t going to make it in

time.”

“I’m going to start healing you now,” Doc says.

I nod and carry on my story as the warmth of Doc’s magic spreads throughout me, “I was nearly there when this giant beast like a giant dog, dark purple and black fur covered it entirely, huge pointed ears, built like a tank, really muscled, and easily as tall as my shoulder, it’s muzzle must have been as long as my arm and it was pissed. It bit me just as I threw myself through the gate.

I don’t mention the guy that I saw because he doesn’t seem relevant to the story and I kind of want to keep him to myself, although I am unsure why I feel that way. The voices, that have been easily ignorable, suddenly get louder and become a buzz in my brain. I have no idea if that means that they agree with my decision or not, but it only lasts for a moment before they quiet back down again.

My shoulder must be healed because I feel River relax slightly underneath me, although he doesn’t let go and holds me just as tightly.

“All done,” Doc says with a smile.

I gingerly test my arm, smiling in relief, and then reach for him, pulling him in for a hug and kissing his cheek.

“Thank you. You are awesome,” I tell him, and he nods, an emotion swirling in his eyes that I’m not entirely sure I can identify.

“Here you go, Neith,” Raiden says as he hands me one of my dessert choices and a spoon. “When you want one of the others, just yell.”

“Thank you,” I say again, but this time to Raiden.

He just smiles, and takes a seat next to River, who doesn't growl and didn't when I hugged Doc so he must be calming down.

The conversation turns back to my little adventure.

"I don't recognize that creature either," Doc frowns. "Definitely not an earth realm creature, not even one that was brought over after the war."

"I will have a look for it when I look for the other creature," Raiden says and then looks back at me, "do you know what realm you were in? That would help narrow it down a lot. There are hundreds, maybe even thousands, of different realms, and the creatures in the realms that are occupied are all different. Outside of the official portals, realm travel is rare now, but it's not unheard of."

"Official portals?" I ask curiously.

Raiden nods, his eyes lighting up, "Yes. It's not something that the humans are aware of because of the issues that it could cause if they went through, wanted to use them, or tried to control them like they have the propensity to want to do. Quite a few supes travel to different realms to gather things that they can't get here, some even go for vacations, or move completely. The majority of the other realms are harsher than here, with their laws and way of life. Some are worse than others."

"Wow," I say. "That's really interesting. Can you tell me about them?"

Raiden's smile is wide and full of happiness, "Yeah. I would love to . . ."

"Raid, I'm sorry, man, but we should probably try to work out Neith's situation," Evander interrupts.

Raiden's face falls, and he starts to look slightly embarrassed.

“Later?” I ask, trying to let the genuine curiosity I have leak into my voice so that he knows that I am just as interested in it as he is. I add, “I absolutely love knowledge, all knowledge, and I know it’s probably really lame, but I love research too, looking through a stack of books to find that one piece of information that makes everything click into place and make sense.”

Raiden looks surprised, and Evander nudges him, “I told you she was like you when it comes to research.”

“I know, I just didn’t believe you,” Raiden replies, clearing his throat, and looking back at me, “do you want to help me figure out what these creatures are? We should have the books in the library here, but if not, we can go and find some more.”

My eyes widen, “You have a library, and it took you this fucking long to tell me!”

Raiden’s eyes widen, “Er, sorry. I didn’t realize that you would be interested.”

“I am very much interested,” I reply, “and I would love to help, tomorrow though. You asked me a question?”

He frowns slightly as he tries to remember, “Ah, yes. Did the imp tell you what realm you were in?”

I shake my head, “No, he gave me very little fucking information and he didn’t answer one of my questions, I don’t even know why I had to do the task. He wouldn’t tell me. I also don’t know why I could understand him and you couldn’t.”

“You spoke his language too,” Griff reminds me.

“Exactly, and I have no idea how the fuck I managed to do that,” I reply, yawning. “I know there is quite a lot to discuss, but it’s light out; we have been up for most of the

night and early morning, and I need sleep. Do you think River will let me up yet?"

Reed smirks, "River has been back in control since you stopped bleeding."

I twist, looking up at a slightly sheepish-looking River who smirks but is clearly worried about my reaction to what happened.

I chuckle, making him relax, "Jeeze, dude if you wanted a cuddle, you should have just said so!" I wrinkle my nose, "You definitely should have let me shower first."

"I don't mind," River says, and then adds, "I just need to know you were okay."

Doing something that is completely unlike me I place my hand on his cheek, "Thank you."

I mean it, it has been a long time since someone has actively cared about the fact that I am injured to the degree that River does, even Sully was just like you will be alright. River let me be vulnerable about it if I wanted to be and hugged me while it was dealt with.

"Anytime," he replies. He smirks, his arms tightening around me, "I suppose that you would like me to let you up?"

I sigh, "I really do need a shower."

"Fine," he grumbles teasingly and reluctantly lets me go.

I get up, already missing the warmth of River's arms and half tempted to crawl back onto his lap, he makes me feel safe and that's a feeling that I like. Griff holds up Betty to me, and I smile as I take her off him.

“Thanks for looking after her,” I say, through yet another yawn.

He smiles just a little bit, “Of course. Go and get some sleep. We will all sleep until we are rested, and we will probably write the rest of today off.”

“Thank fuck for that,” I reply, “if you were about to tell me that I needed to be up in a couple of hours, I was going to rebel.”

“How?” Evander asks, memories sparking in his eyes.

I shrug, “Oh, I don’t know, steal everyone’s clothes so that they had to stay in their rooms, and I could sleep more.”

“I don’t think that would work with us,” Reed points out. His smile surprises me when it turns wicked, and he adds, “We would just walk around naked.”

I’m momentarily speechless as the images play through my mind like the best dirty movie before I smile slowly, “In that case, I am definitely going to steal all your clothes. I don’t see the downside of that scenario.”

“It’s not really fair if we are all naked and you’re dressed,” Ransom teases, a sexy half smile on his lips.

“And that’s enough of that,” Doc says, his eyes briefly flashing gold, and I would be willing to bet that his incubus is getting a good hit of desire right now.

I wink at him because I can, and apparently, I do that now. I swear I have done that more in the last few days than I have in the entirety of my life.

Without waiting for any sort of response, because Doc is right, that conversation needs to stop before I say something like, I will take mine off if you take yours off,

and we all end up naked.

Teammates: they are my teammates.

In my tired state, I really couldn't give a shit, a good fuck before I fall asleep would be awesome, but then I always think that is the case.

As I'm walking toward the door, my intuition prickles.

"Neith!" Ransom yells, sounding panicked.

I turn, once again moving faster than I should be able to, my hand lifting as I catch my sword that is flying straight toward the back of me. I instinctively know what was wrong as soon as it's in my hand.

I chuckle, "Apparently, it didn't want to be left behind."

"Well, that's an extreme way to go about making sure it was taken with you. It nearly impaled you," Reed growls, looking like he is trying to calm himself down.

I shrug, and then draw my eyebrows together, "It knew that I would catch it, but it's also testing me."

"Testing you?" Griff asks, not pleased by that prospect at all.

"Yeah," I reply, and shrug again, "I don't know why."

Raiden smiles, "It's curious how you found it and how it's now definitely attached itself to you."

"Are we surprised though? Neith seems to defy all of the rules," Reed rumbles.

A fissure of insecurity unfurls inside me, and I pull on my best unaffected mask as I ask teasingly, “I bet you wish I hadn’t turned up on your doorstep now.”

“Never, I wish you had turned up sooner,” Evander says.

“Me too,” River adds, his eyes serious like he can tell that this means a lot to me, “we missed out on a lot of Neith time.”

“Life has been a hell of a lot more interesting with you here,” Raiden adds.

“Definitely,” Griff agrees in one-word fashion.

Doc smiles, “I’m afraid it looks like you are stuck with us.”

Reed just nods in agreement, his expression serious and assuring me that he agrees with the others.

That knot of tension that had made itself known unravels, settling. It will probably come back at some point, they don’t even know everything about me that makes me weird, and until they do, I will be continuously worrying that they are going to walk away, that the next thing that they find out about me will be the thing that tips them over the edge and makes them tell me to leave.

“Thanks, guys,” I mutter with a soft smile. My thoughts move back to what we were initially discussing since I now desperately want to change the subject before they realize just how serious I was being when I said that. “Sully’s poker game is at the end of the week; I have got to go because Ernie is convinced that he can win his money back and wants a rematch.” I smile affectionately as I continue, “He is petty enough to send people for me, pretending he’s all big and scary just so that I’ll play.”

“He is big and scary,” River points out, his eyebrow raised.

I pull a face, “Nah, he’s a softie.”

Reed shakes his head, “I can’t believe that you call the high vamp of the western cities a softie.”

“I’ve met him, if anyone else dared he would have their heads, literally,” Doc adds.

I just shrug, I suppose to the majority of people Ernie would appear to be that way, mainly because he actually is. He didn’t earn the title of High Vamp out of the goodness of his heart, supernaturals don’t work like that, their system is brutal, and violent and quite frankly I love it. The thing about Ernie is that once you have earned his loyalty, that’s it, you are good with him for as long as you live, unless you do something to fuck it up.

I earned Ernie’s trust years ago.

I decide that there is no point trying to explain that to the guys right now, especially since that will lead to more questions and I really want to shower and sleep, so I carry on what I was going to say, before I forget what I was saying in the first place.

Of course, my brain gets sidetracked, and I don’t say what I had intended and instead, say, “If Ernie surprises you then the others definitely will.”

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Neith

Doc's eyebrows rise, "Well now I am really curious, maybe we should see if Sully will let us sit in."

"I would be up for that," Griff replies, the others all nodding as well as they turn to look at me questioningly.

"You can ask him, but I don't know if he will let you in. The people that play like to keep their presence at the tavern unknown, and they like to keep SID agents at a distance," I reply.

"You're a SID agent," Reed points out.

I nod and grin, "Yeah, but I wasn't when they met me, and they know that they can trust me. In time, that should extend to you guys."

I want to add if you stick around but I feel like that would be fishing at this point and I am not that person, so I keep that inside.

"We'll come," Evander says. "It's not like we weren't going to follow you anyway. If Sully says no, then we will just hang out and wait."

I raise my eyebrow, "You were going to follow me anyway?"

"Of course we were," River replies like it was obvious.

Reed clears his throat, gaining my attention, “You died. We watched it happen; you are going to have to cope with us being a bit overbearing for a while.”

A knot of emotion rises in my throat, and I have to swallow it down before saying, “Okay. I can handle that.”

“You say that,” Ransom starts, his voice serious although there is a smile playing on his lips, “but having seven possessive men following you around like lost puppies, is not for everyone.”

I chuckle, although my heart beats harder; I know that it’s because I nearly died, and they are worried about the aftereffects, but I still like it. I think I will find it far too easy to have them around me all the time, and I worry that when they decide that I am all good and they back off, that I’m going to miss it more than I should.

That’s enough of that.

“Anyway, what I was saying was that when I go to the poker game, I can ask Sully and see if he knows anything about it,” I say, changing the subject and yawning again.

“Good idea,” Evander says and then smiles softly, “go to bed before you fall asleep standing up again.”

“Again?” Raiden questions, already sounding amused even though he doesn’t know the story.

“That was one time!” I retort. “Before he starts telling it, I’m off to bed, night guys.”

A chorus of goodnights follows me out of the room, and my cheeks begin to hurt from smiling so widely.

Whispering to Betty, I say, “Makes a difference from just saying it to you, Betty. No offense, but you left much to be desired when it came to conversation.”

Of course, she doesn’t reply, but she never has, and actually, if she started to talk to me now, it would scare the shit out of me and make me question everything. I gingerly push through my bedroom door, trying really hard not to get anything that’s on me on the door because, gross. As I go to lay Betty and my sword, which I am going to have to name, on the bed, I notice with surprise that the sword is clean.

It shouldn’t be, it was very definitely covered in all sorts of disgusting stuff, and I didn’t see Reed clean it, he didn’t have the time to anyway. It is very definitely squeaky clean; I even lift it closer to my face to inspect it.

“Huh,” I mutter aloud, a self-cleaning sword. That’s pretty fucking neat. Since I am already talking to weapons like a crazy person, I continue speaking out loud and decide to introduce them, “Betty, this my new sword, I haven’t named her yet, but don’t worry I will. Sword, this is Betty. She has saved my life countless times. While I am showering and cleaning up, introduce yourselves.”

Although it is slightly insane to be talking to your weapons, the sword is an enchanted object which means that it kind of might understand me, I’m not really to sure, the lore on enchanted objects is a bit fuzzy, at least it is for humans so who the fuck knows. That is something that I can ask Raiden when we have our research date.

My stomach flutters with butterflies, and I shoot that shit down immediately, I am having to do that a lot at the moment, and I am already over it. Maybe exposure will dull my reaction to them? Like the longer that I spend with them, the less affected I will be by them.

I have a feeling that isn’t going to be the case, but whatever.

“It’s not a date,” I mutter out loud, speaking to the reflection of myself in the huge mirror above the bathroom sink.

Grimacing, I realize exactly how bad I look. I can’t believe that River held me for so long, not that I’m complaining, not even a little bit. There I go again, feeling things I shouldn’t.

Fuck it, I am a grown ass woman, kinda, I’m going to let myself feel what I’m feeling but I won’t act on it unless they do, I am too old to be fucking around with trying to suppress feelings and shit, what the fuck ever. If I am being completely honest with myself, then I have to admit that my attraction and interest in them probably won’t last for very long anyway. I get bored very easily, it’s not a reflection on the person that I was interested in, it’s me, I get distracted incredibly easily.

With these guys, that means that these feelings of wanting to fuck them until the sun comes up, all of them, individually or as a group, I’m not picky; those feelings will disappear and settle into what they should be, and that’s friendship and teammates.

I have just got to feel what I need to feel and then wait it out.

Easy.

The voices stir, and I choose not to look too much into the reason why they have decided to change the pitch of their murmurings. I just want to get clean and sleep. I start tugging at my clothes and I do mean tugging, most of them are stuck to me in one place or another and I find myself really having to pull in order to get them to come off.

“Ow, shit,” I curse, as I pull off a part on my stomach that is particularly stuck and leave my skin red raw underneath.

Finally, I have managed to get it all off, and I add them to the pile in the corner of the bathroom that needs burning, none of that is salvageable, which means I have officially run out of outfits, and I am down to my last pair of underwear. The good news is that is tomorrow's problem because I have my sleep shirt that I have been using and leggings, not that I wear leggings in bed, but they are there for the morning.

I turn the shower up as hot as I can stand it, and then step under the spray, pulling a face as I watch all the brown stained water run off me. That really is gross, I thought I got most of the blood and dirt on my clothes but there was clearly quite a lot on my feet and in my hair.

Ew.

It takes four rounds of shampoo and soap for me to finally feel like I am clean, and I step out of the shower, drying myself as fast as possible and getting dressed. As I move into my room again, I stare longingly at the bed, as much as I want to go straight to sleep, I know that when I do sleep I'm going to be sleeping for a while so that I can recover from dying and every fucking other thing that has happened since that. With this in mind, I move over to the desk in here instead and rummage around, finding a pen and some paper, I get to work on my report.

I'm a page into my report when there is a soft knock at the door.

Pulling it open, I see a slightly nervous looking River, "I didn't wake you, did I?"

I shake my head, "No, is everything okay?"

"Yeah, here," he holds out what I can only assume is a shirt, and I take it with a slight frown on my face. He scrubs a hand over the back of his neck, "I thought you may need something to sleep in." He smirks and adds, "I like you in my shirts."

I smile and pull the shirt closer. It's soft and black, and although I avoid looking like a complete weirdo and sniffing it, I do get a whiff of his scent on it, and I love it.

"Thanks, this one is getting a bit close to its last legs now," I say, plucking at the hem of my shirt. His eyes track my movement, dipping lower to trace a slow path up my exposed legs, he gulps and glances away, but not before I have seen the searing heat in his eyes and quite frankly, I have never felt sexier.

He clears his throat, his voice coming out rougher as he says, "You're welcome. Night."

"Night," I reply to his already retreating back.

Smiling, I shut my door and immediately take off my sleep shirt, pulling on River's one instead, hooking it over my nose, and taking a deep breath, calm settling over my entire body. Wearing his shirt over my almost naked body is an entirely different feeling from pulling his shirt on over my ruined clothes. I can almost pretend that it's River wrapped around me and to be honest I might do just that later, but first, I need to be a grown up and finish writing up the report.

River

She must think I am a moron, to be honest I probably am. I would blame my kitsune for wanting to make sure that she wears my scent, but quite honestly, it's not that at all, well it's partly that. It's me, I wasn't lying, I really do love seeing her in my shirt.

I had to walk away from her when I did because I was moments away from throwing caution to the wind and taking her right there against the fucking door. She looked absolutely fucking delectable in that shirt, but I am starting to think that I would feel that way about her no matter what she was wearing. She was covered in blood, dirt, and fuck knows what else earlier, and I couldn't give a shit. My kitsune started that

and shocked the fuck out of me, I have never had that reaction to anyone. Even so, I managed to get that side of me reigned in reasonably quickly, and I didn't want to let her go. She felt right in my arms, and I know that makes no sense, I have only known her properly for a few days and really how well can you get to know someone in a few days?

It is what it is though, and there is no doubt in my mind that I feel something for Neith. I would be tempted to say that it was something like a mate bond, but I don't have one. Kitsune mate bonds are decided based on strength, and the strength of a kitsune's partner needs to be equal, or they risk hurting them with their magic, and they wouldn't be compatible anyway. I have nine tails. I am the only kitsune alive with nine tails, and there aren't any with more than six; I am too strong to have a mate. I made my peace with that a long time ago. It doesn't mean that I have to be alone; I can have relationships and sex, but I won't ever be able to experience the magic of a true mate bond.

My strength has ostracized me in my pack, and I did so from a very young age. As soon as I was old enough to go to the academy it was a relief for everyone involved, I was out of their hair, and I very rarely go back now. I will never stop thanking the fates for putting me in the path of the guys. They have become my pack, and their strength easily matches up to mine and, in some cases, surpasses it. I am free to be wholly me, and that is something that I didn't have until I met them at the academy.

My kitsune and I are one and the same, we aren't separate entities sharing the same body, but my kitsune side does have different reactions to different situations than I do. Usually, I am the only one aware but when the reaction is strong enough, like Neith bleeding and no one taking care of her, then it can trigger that side of me to come out more in my human form.

It hasn't happened since I was a teenager, and my emotions were running high anyway.

It's curious.

"Was she awake?" Doc asks, a smirk on his face and a twinkle in his eyes as I walk back into the front room and take a seat on the couch.

"How did you know . . ." I trail off.

"Dude, you went all alpha on us, there was no point in us even betting on whether you were going to give her one of your shirts to sleep in, it was inevitable," Evander smirks.

I shrug and flip the room off as a whole because they are all grinning at me, "Fuck you all. It's not like any of you are unaffected," I point out and look at Doc, "you've joined our team, which we have been asking you to do for years, and you've moved into the house after saying that you preferred your own space but spending most of your time here anyway."

Doc grins, sipping a beer, and says, "I guess I just needed a little push."

"She's come into our lives in a fucking whirlwind, and I feel like shits only just getting started," Raiden says.

"You summed Neith up perfectly," Van agrees, "a whirlwind. You will never be the same after you have met Neith."

The room falls silent for a moment, and I can bet that all of our thoughts are on the beautiful, silver haired woman who has no brain to mouth filter whatsoever.

I love it. It certainly keeps things interesting.

"She has an enchanted sword," Reed mutters incredulously as if it is only just sinking

in.

“She also seems to think that she is a weak supernatural,” Doc mutters.

I frown, “I don’t think that she has actually fully come to terms with the fact that she is one, so much has happened that she has had barely any down time.”

“I don’t know, Neith is pretty good at figuring shit out for herself, she might have had enough time when she went on that walk,” Evander replies, he knows her better than we all do, and I hope that he is right.

“Speaking off, you let her walk alone?” Reed demands.

“Dude, we can’t let her do anything, we don’t own her,” Griff starts raising his eyebrow and Reed immediately deflates.

He scrubs a hand over his face, “I know that. She just brings out all of my fucking protective instincts.”

“I think it’s safe to say she does that for all of us,” I point out.

Van chuckles, “Don’t let her hear you say, ‘let her’. She will tear you a new one.”

Reed smirks, crossing his arms over his chest as his power ripples ever so slightly, not enough to cause us any discomfort though, “In that case, I might do just that.”

I snort, the fucker likes that Neith can go toe to toe with him and isn’t scared of him.

“You would,” Doc grins.

“Has she got a glamour on her?” Griff asks suddenly, “Is that why her supe side is

only coming out now?”

Ransom shakes his head, “I can’t feel one, and even a really strong one that had a concealment in I would have been able to pick up on.”

“So, it really is only just starting to make itself known,” Griff mumbles.

“It would seem that way,” Doc replies.

“Does anyone have any idea what kind of supe she could be?” I ask, “She doesn’t smell like a shifter, and I haven’t ever heard of one shifting this late in life. Although, she still smells human, most of the time.”

“Most of the time?” Van asks curiously.

I nod, “Yeah, it’s like when we first met her in Bobby’s, and I got caught smelling her. She smells human pretty much all of the time, and then I get a whiff of something other, something more, but I have never smelt anything like it before, so I can’t place it.”

The room is silent as they all contemplate what I have said. I don’t know what it could mean, all I can guess is that it is her supe side, and honestly if that is how she is going to smell when her supernatural nature is fully revealed then I am fucked, I have no idea how I will fucking concentrate. She smells like fucking home and everything that encompasses.

The guys can tease me all they want about wanting her to wear my scent, but they are just as tied up in knots over Neith as I am.

“I guess, we are just going to have to wait and see, I imagine that her magic is going to let itself known bit by bit,” Doc replies, still frowning.

“I have no idea what kind of supernatural she is,” Evander says. “It worries me that everyone has been sworn to secrecy when it comes to Neith.”

“More than just sworn to secrecy, everyone has been spelled into secrecy,” Ransom replies. “Sully is not a weak supernatural, he is strong as fuck, and he wanted to tell Neith, that was easy to deduce, but he couldn’t. That is some pretty potent fucking magic.”

River

“It’s also worrying,” I agree. “Why? Why is there so much secrecy surrounding Neith? Enough that very strong supernaturals are being silenced.”

Everyone looks confused. None of us know what is going on and how we can help in this situation. Hell, we don’t even know what the situation is. Not really.

“I don’t like not knowing,” Raiden frowns. “I like knowing what we are up against, so I know the best way to combat it or, in this case, help.”

“We know man,” I reply gently.

“Sully said that she is going to need us, and that makes me worry too. She isn’t weak, so if she needs us, then that suggests that things are going to happen that are really fucking dangerous. I don’t like that. I don’t want her in danger,” Griff adds.

“We will figure it out,” Van says with confidence that I don’t think any of us feel, not even him. He adds, “Together.”

That is at least something that we can all agree on. Together is what we do best, and now we have Neith that is a part of that.

“Anyone want another beer?” Doc says as he gets up, draining the last of his current one.

“I’ll take one,” I reply.

Once he's back, Van clears his throat, looking a bit awkward, which immediately makes me pay more attention. Van never looks awkward,

"What's up?" Reed asks, his eyes narrowing slightly.

He seems to think about it for a moment and then shakes his head, "Nothing."

I frown slightly, "Are you sure? It's us."

Van smiles, "Yeah, I know. It's all good, I realized that it wasn't something that needed to be said."

I admit that I am curious now, but I don't think that he's going to tell us. If Evander decides later down the line that it is something that he needs to bring up, then he will. That's how we work.

"It's going to be interesting figuring out the dynamic with an extra member," Ransom mutters.

"Two," Doc smirks. "I have a feeling that I am going to be coming on more jobs with you."

I raise my eyebrows, "What about the lab?"

He loves that place. We usually only see him on the jobs where someone has died, and he's there to pick them up or if we go into the lab for whatever reason. He comes on the occasional job with us, but it's rare. Of course, we see him plenty outside of work, and he spends most of his weekends here with us unless he's working on something interesting in his lab. He has his own room and everything, he just hasn't officially moved in, well I suppose he has now, I smirk.

“I’ll still be there, but I will be with you guys more.” He sighs, “I know what you are all thinking, and I meant what I said earlier, I did need the push that Neith gave me, but I have been toying with the idea of switching it up so that I work more with you guys as part of the team for a while now. I guess I have just been nervous to step away from what I have known for so long,” Doc replies.

Ransom raises his eyebrows, “And?”

Doc chuckles, “And I wasn’t entirely sure that you guys really wanted me here and fully in the team.”

There it is.

We should have known. Like the rest of us, Doc has some shit in his past that has deeply affected him, and it has been a while since we pushed the issue of him being a part of the team because we didn’t want to pressure him. But he could have thought that we weren’t asking as much anymore because we no longer wanted him on the team.

“You silly fucker,” Reed says in his blunt way that has everyone, including Doc laughing.

“Somehow, Neith being here has already changed things for the better, and she doesn’t even realize that she has done anything,” Ransom mutters.

“It’s Neith,” Evander says like that is all the explanation that we need and to be honest, I am starting to understand that it is.

The ringing of Van’s phone has us all raising our eyebrows. It’s really fucking early in the morning. I frown, hoping that we aren’t about to get called on a job because not only have we had no sleep, but Neith has only been asleep for an hour, if that.

“It’s Ty,” Van tells us since we are all looking at him curiously.

“Maybe they have found something in the woods?” Griff suggests.

Evander shakes his head, “I don’t think so, one of the agents would have rung me not Ty himself.” He presses answer, automatically putting it on speaker so that we can all hear.

“Hey guys,” Ty says, and we all reply. “Is Neith there?”

Van raises his eyebrow slightly, “No, she has gone to bed. We haven’t slept yet.”

I’m reasonably sure that he threw that in there to make sure that Ty wasn’t about to send us off on a job. We won’t go; it wouldn’t be safe for us too when we are as exhausted as we are. If Ty gets the underlying message, he doesn’t say anything, and it becomes pretty clear why.

“I spoke to Sully, so I know that you are aware that I knew Neith’s parents,” Ty starts.

Surprise flashes through me. I had completely forgotten that piece of information in everything that has happened, and I am reasonably sure that Neith has as well since she hasn’t mentioned it.

“Yes, we are aware,” Reed replies with a frown. None of us are really sure where he is going with this conversation, it’s not immediately obvious.

“Her parents were really good friends of mine, we were best friends, all of us,” he gets this wistful tone to his voice, before he clears his throat and continues, “it’s because of that, I need you know something.”

“Know what?” Doc asks as we all share a look.

Ty is usually fairly laidback and easygoing, at least as far as bosses go, but he’s currently talking in a way that is a lot more serious than he usually does unless it has something to do with a case. I have a feeling that he is about to confirm all of the things that we have just been talking about, or at least some of them.

“She is going to need you. Her life has been dangerous and hard, more so than you guys are probably aware of yet, but it’s going to get a thousand times harder.”

Fuck.

There was no messing around with that sentence, no sugarcoating it. Ty has said it how it is, and I can feel a sense of foreboding come over us all. He is the second person to tell us that she is going to need us, Sully being the first, and Neith doesn’t seem like the kind of person who needs help often.

“Is there anything that you can tell us to help us help her?” Raiden asks. He easily articulates what the rest of us want to say.

I always find it amusing that people overlook or don’t notice that he is a freaking genius and easily as intelligent as Doc simply because he is a reaper, and therefore, he can’t be anything else but deadly and at the risk of becoming insane. The mistreatment of reapers makes me mad as hell, but nothing will make me as angry as the way that reapers have treated Raiden. Now is not the time to allow that anger to arise, so I tune back into the conversation.

Ty sighs heavily, and I know that there are things that he wants to say, but I am assuming that, like Sully, he can’t say what he wants to.

“When it comes to Neith, throw away the rule book and everything that you think you

know. She is unlike anything that you will have ever come across and anything that you will ever come across,” Ty replies, somewhat cryptically, sounding like he’s talking through clenched teeth. He doesn’t give us a chance to reply or ask any questions as he adds, “It is extremely important that HID do not find out that Neith is actually a supernatural.”

We all straighten, tensing, and Evander asks, “Is she in danger?”

“She will be as soon as her supe side makes a full appearance,” Ty replies, and I am actually surprised that he was able to answer that one.

“Why?” Reed demands.

A choking noise comes from the other end of the phone, and we once again share a concerned look.

“I can’t say. I am really sorry guys; you know I would tell you if I could. We promised her parents that we would look after her, and I feel like we have failed her so far. I know that the fates have a plan, and I fear that . . .” Ty trails off.

“Ty?” Van questions.

His voice is different when he answers, lilting, it sounds like his voice but not at the same time.

What the hell?

“The darkness brews, the light pushed back, the voices whisper don’t fall off track, pain and sadness the pressure mounts, don’t lose sight of what counts. Death, death, death.” When he speaks again, his voice is normal, and he continues his previous sentence like he hadn’t stopped to freak us all the fuck out in the middle of it, “no one

will survive what's to come.”

Evander shakes his head warning us not to say anything, we can discuss it after the phone call has ended, but the fact that he carried on the conversation as he did makes me think that he wasn't aware that he stopped the way he did.

“We've got her,” Evander says instead.

Ty's voice holds a smile as he says, “I thought that you might. I saw that Doc is there with you, have you finally made a decision?”

Doc smiles as if to say to us, ‘see I was thinking about it before Neith came into our lives and turned everything upside down’. I shake my head with a smile, we believed him because he told us that was the truth, that's all we needed.

Doc clears his throat, “Yeah, I am officially on their team and living in the house. I will still be available for autopsy and lab work and all of that, but I will be participating more in jobs as well.”

“Understood,” Ty replies, “I'm happy for you guys.”

“Thanks,” Van replies with a smile now that the conversation seems to have switched.

“Before you go, I need you guys at the training academy on Monday, bring Neith,” Ty says, throwing us another curve ball, “it will be good for everyone to see you all officially as a team.”

“Why do I feel like there is something that you aren't telling us?” Griff interrupts, his eyes narrowing slightly.

Ty sighs again, “Because there is. I need to warn you that a couple of the other teams are aware of her track record at HID and have shown an interest.”

We all tense, and I can barely stop the growl building in my chest from escaping.

“She’s ours,” Evander practically orders, a fierceness in his voice that has even my eyebrow rising, although I can’t argue with the sentiment. It feels right in a way that it probably shouldn’t.

Ty chuckles, his voice lacing with knowledge as he replies, “You mean on your team?”

Evander swallows, “Yes, that’s what I meant.”

That doesn’t ring quite true, and we all know it but none of us want to look into the reason behind why that doesn’t quite sit right.

“Don’t worry, I am discouraging it, but there are several teams that have shown an interest in her now and have come to me asking if she is on your team,” Ty says. “If any one of them puts in an official request to have her on their team, then Neith is going to have to go through the Choosing to see which team she is better suited for.”

Silence reigns as we all try to control our reaction, I feel a rumble of a growl start to grow in my chest and we are all clenching our jaws or fists.

“Fuck!” Evander curses explosively.

“I know with complete certainty that she will get chosen for your team, but it’s not something that we want Neith to go through. The Choosing is for supernaturals, Neith is mostly human at the moment, so there is a very strong chance that she wouldn’t survive it.”

There is no way in hell that she should be anywhere near the fucking Choosing, even if she were a supernatural, I would still not want her anywhere near it, it's fucking brutal.

We all look at each other with anger, the most prominent expression on our faces, and a pit of unease settles in my stomach. Wouldn't it be a better idea to keep Neith away from the other agents for a while and let the novelty of her wear off and their interest in having her on their team wane?

Van seems to read my mind as he says, "Are you sure that it's a good idea to have her come to the training academy with us, if some of the teams are looking to have her on their team wouldn't that just increase their interest in her?"

"Yes, I do think that she should be seen with your team. As I said, the interested parties need to see her with your team and realize that you are serious about her being a part of it. If you left her at home while you came here, that would send the message that you don't consider her fully on your team, and therefore, they will pursue wanting her on theirs. Considering there are a few teams that are interested in her and you are unwilling to let her go, that means that the Choosing will get triggered," Ty explains his reasoning behind wanting us to bring her to the training academy, and as much as I hate to agree I can see the merit behind his reasoning.

That doesn't mean I have to like it.

"Fine, we will all be there on Monday," Evander replies and then hangs up.

"I don't like this," Reed mutters.

Doc frowns, his forearms tensing as he clenches and unclenches his fists, "Me neither. I don't like that Ty had a vision that he was completely unaware of as well. He just carried on talking straight after it like nothing had happened."

“If it even was a vision,” Raiden says and then clarifies, “it is entirely possible that someone was using Ty to give us a message.”

“Fuck,” Griff curses, huffing and crossing his arms over his chest.

“Did you write it down?” I ask.

Raiden rolls his eyes, “Of course I did. I will research it when Neith and I are looking into the creatures.”

“Good idea,” Van says, still frowning.

“What if she gets pulled into the Choosing?” Ransom mumbles, having been quiet up until this point.

“Then we will have to help her as much as we can and hope that she is strong enough to withstand the tasks and that the scroll deems her best suited for our team,” Doc says firmly, almost as if he is willing it to happen that way if that’s the way it has to happen.

“I really fucking hope that it doesn’t come to that,” Ransom frowns, his expression grim.

He is right to be worried about it. The Choosing is a series of tasks, some that the person has to face individually and some that they have to do with the teams that are petitioning to have the individual join their team. The idea is to get the person working with each team to get an idea of where the person fits best. The scroll, which is exactly what it sounds like apart from being older than dirt and imbued with ancient magic, then picks the team that the person is best suited to based on the performance in the tasks.

These tasks test a supernatural's skills, physically, mentally and emotionally, they are designed to push a supe, and the team that they work with to the very edge of their abilities.

Therein lies the problem: they are designed for supernaturals, and Neith isn't one. They can and have been deadly for supernaturals that have a massive advantage over Neith.

The Choosing isn't always used to pick out the teams, supernaturals at the training academies can choose their own teams, and that then gives them the flexibility to disband the teams and move on, if it doesn't work out. You don't get that choice if the scroll has put you with your team. Its magic binds you and the rest of the team members together, and it's for life. The Choosing is only used in cases where two teams are fighting or have shown an interest in one individual, and although it does still happen, it doesn't happen as much as it used to before the war, in fact it is now pretty fucking rare. Back in Trieneliea, going through the trials was more common than simply choosing your team. Supernaturals wanted the reassurance that they were with the people that they were fated to be with because the things that they had to face over there were so much more dangerous. The Choosing was attached to their Warrior academies, whereas it's now attached to the training academies for SID.

The trials usually last for a week, and while they are taking place, all teams involved stay in a pocket realm to ensure that there is no cheating and no outside influences. The trials also take place there. The Choosing draws a huge supernatural crowd and is magically projected so that they can watch it unfold over a week. It would be a bad idea for Neith to be involved for many reasons, her being a human being the main one. Another reason, though, is that she is supposed to be dead, and although the agency can shield her somewhat, we know that someone supernatural wanted Neith. If they were to watch the Choosing, then they would see that not only is she alive when she should definitely be dead, but that she is also doing things that a human shouldn't be able to do.

She also can't die, if she dies and comes back to life for the majority of the supernatural world to see then that is going to paint a massive target on her back and again, allow the supernatural who was after her in the first place to actively start searching for her again.

This has the potential to be really fucking bad, and I hope that Ty is right and bringing her to the training academy is the right idea.

"I don't want to take her to the training academy," Griff says into the tense silence that has descended over us all.

"I don't think that we have much choice," Ransom practically growls.

"Ransom is right. Ty didn't sound like he was going to back down on this," Van replies with a frown.

"Do you think he knows something that we don't?" Raiden suddenly asks, his brain one step ahead of us like usual.

River

A growl rises in my throat, “He better not, this is Neith we are talking about, and I will be pissed as fuck if he knew something that would help us help her and didn’t share it.”

Eyebrows rise around the room at my declaration, but no one disagrees with me. They all feel the same way that I do, and I would imagine that Ty would be very surprised by our reaction if something happened to Neith, and it turns out that he could have told us something that would have prevented it.

“He said that there were several teams involved, but I’ll give you three guesses as to the name of one of them,” Ransom says, his jaw clenching.

“We don’t need three guesses,” Griff replies instantly, “Draconian.”

It's a stupid name if you ask me, considering there are five of them on the team, and only three of them are dragons; I guess the majority ruled in that instance. They give dragons a bad name, and that is putting it mildly. The leader, Kylen, is a giant dick and has had a problem with us for as long as we’ve been at the academy, and before that actually since we went to the Magical Academy with him as well. He always tried to be the best, and we always were, it has rubbed him the wrong way for decades. The rest of his team is just as bad as he is, and I actually have no idea how they have remained agents; everyone is aware of their morally grey practices when it comes to making sure the law is upheld.

The only person who is decent on the entire team is Coen, although he comes across

as a dick at first. If you get him away from the others, he's actually really fucking awesome. None of us know why he stays on a team of supes like that, but he must have more in common with them than we realize. Their team isn't a chosen team, so he could leave anytime that he wants.

"Would they really make Neith go through the Choosing, which could kill her, just because she's on our team and they hate us?" I ask and then immediately shake my head, "Never mind, of course they fucking would, they're cunts."

"Exactly." Evander replies, "It's not like we can even talk to them about it and convince them not to do it because that would just show them how much Neith means to us, and then they would want to do it even more."

"Like I said, cunts," I retort.

"I imagine that Neith is going to mad as fuck that the Choosing is going to choose for her which team she should be on when she knows she wants to be on ours," Raiden says.

Evander winces, "No, she is going to take that very badly, especially when she gets told that it's mandatory and not something that she can just not do because she hates being told what to do. I imagine if it happens, she is going to raise hell the whole time that she does it."

"Let's hope that it doesn't come to that," Reed says, looking even more serious than usual.

"We need to tell her that it's a possibility," Griff points out.

"Are you sure?" Ransom asks, "It's just going to stress her out even more than she already is, and she has a lot of shit to deal with at the moment as it is."

Griff nods, “Yes. I haven’t known her for that long, but she would be pissed as fuck if we kept something like this from her.”

“Griff is right,” Evander agrees, “plus, if we give her a warning that it may happen, we could start to prepare her for it, just in case.”

I nod, “She seems to be a bit like me with her fidgeting and getting easily distracted, and if something like this was happening to me, or there was a possibility of it happening, then I would need to know as soon as possible so I had enough time to get used to the idea.”

Ransom sighs. “Shit, yeah, you’re right. We can tell her tomorrow; we have a fairly chilled out day after we have written the reports.”

“Well, I suggest that we tell her and then give her something to beat the shit out of because she hates being told that she has to do something, especially something like this,” Evander says.

“Done,” Reed says, and I have no idea what he is planning but there is definitely some sort of plan brewing behind those eyes.

“Let’s get to bed. The sun is up, and we definitely shouldn’t be,” Raiden mutters with a yawn as he gets up.

None of us argue with the suggestion, we are all exhausted, it feels like we haven’t stopped the last few days. I frown as I watch Raiden. The shadows in his eyes are a lot more prominent than they usually are, and I don’t like it.

The amount of power that he kicked off earlier when he saved Neith was incredible, far more than I ever thought he was capable of and thought he was strong anyway. The power was so strong that I’m worried that Ransom’s wards wouldn’t have been

enough to conceal the flare of magic from the Reaper council, and that could be very bad. Especially since Raiden has wings, fucking enormous stunning wings that are colored in similar shades to his hair, black that shimmers purple and blue when the moonlight hits them just right. I have never seen a reaper with wings like that. Hell, I have only seen two or three reapers with wings, and they are on the high council. They aren't going to like the fact that Raiden has wings, especially wings of his color. At this point, I am just assuming that the color of his wings is significant, and considering that all other reapers have light-colored wings, I would be very surprised if I am wrong.

He didn't ask what color his wings were, although he didn't seem extremely surprised that he had them. He must have always known that he was strong, he had to, there is no way that he had that power inside and didn't feel the strength of it. What is worrying me though is that he has felt the freedom of having his magic free now, and having to keep it confined after setting it free in such a spectacular way is going to be a hell of a lot more difficult than it was when he locked it away as a child.

What he did for Neith is truly monumental and could have harsh consequences for Raiden, which means for the rest of us as well because there is no way in any of the known realms that we would allow him to deal with the Reaper council by himself.

It's not going to happen.

I have a feeling that Neith is going to be right there with us, and I have to admit that I like that. My intuition is telling me that Raiden is going to need all the backup that he can get if the council felt the power blast that he let off. I want Raiden to be entirely himself, not to lock away any parts of himself, but I want him to do it on his terms and not because some fucking council is demanding that he does.

I frown. I might bring it up with him and see how open he is to using his other magic again now that he has had it free. I think it would be a really good idea to start using

it and not get caught out if the Reaper Council does call him. Otherwise, his reaction is also going to be emotional, and that is going to make him vulnerable, and the Reaper Council will use that against him. I would much rather that he was vulnerable with us and could work with his other magic at his own pace and with people who love him than be surrounded by a bunch of snakes.

I know that the others will agree with me, but at the end of the day, it's up to Raiden. If he is not comfortable with it, then that's the end of the discussion, and we will respect that. A ping of intuition tells me that this is the right thing to do, and I need to talk to Raiden as soon as I can and suggest it.

"River?" Doc asks, pulling me from my thoughts, and I realize that while I have been absorbed in my own wonderings, everyone else has left.

"Yeah, sorry, I was in a world of my own then," I say as I get up and stretch.

He watches me cautiously, "Is everything okay? Do you want to talk about what happened with Neith?"

My eyebrows draw down in confusion for a moment, the question completely throwing me since it had nothing to do with what I was thinking about.

When it finally clicks, I smile, "No, I'm good. I have a feeling that Neith might bring all sorts of reactions out in us."

"True," Doc replies.

I start to move past him, still smiling, when I notice that he is frowning and hasn't started to move. He's just standing there.

"You alright, man. Is there anything you want to talk about?" I ask him curiously.

His frown deepens, but he replies, “Neith is practically human.”

“Yeah,” I reply, unsure where he’s going with this.

He scrubs his hand across the back of his neck, “Humans can have relationships with low-level supes with no consequences, but none of us are low-level supes.”

It hits me like a ton of bricks exactly what he means, we haven’t spoken about it aloud, but its obvious that we all find Neith attractive, and she is more human than supe right now, which means we have to be really fucking careful.

“Shit, you’re right. She fits in so well with us and holds her own even fucking better than most supes would that it hadn’t even occurred to me,” I reply, “message the guys in our chat. She is a supe Doc, we just have to be patient if it gets to that.”

I am aware that I’m not saying it, and I think it’s because neither of us are quite ready to admit it yet, but Doc is a doctor and he looks after us all, it’s understandable that he would have thought of this first and that he felt the need to warn the rest of us.

“Done, they’ve all seen it and replied similar to you,” Doc replies, his shoulder slumping a bit. It was clearly something that he had been worrying about.

I clap him on the shoulder, “Come on, dude, let’s get some sleep. It’s been a long ass few days.”

He chuckles as he follows me from the room, and up the stairs, we both look to the end of the hall where Neith’s door is.

“She’s going to change everything, isn’t she?” I mutter out loud without really meaning to.

“She already is,” Doc smirks before he turns on his heel and heads down the hallway to his now permanent room.

It feels good to have him here, properly here and a part of the team. Usually, you would have to worry about an adjustment period where we all got used to him living here and working with us more often. It’s Doc though, he’s spent more time here than I am sure he has spent anywhere else, we know we work well together, he’s one of us and has been for a very long time now.

I make my way to my room, and strip as soon as I walk through the door, leaving a trail of clothes behind me leading to the shower, I will pick them up later. All I want to do now is shower and get some sleep. I am fucking exhausted, more so now that I can actually see my bed. It has to be one of my most favorite places to be. Rushing through my shower, I don’t bother with clothes as I throw myself on my bed, landing face down and grabbing my pillow as I wriggle my way under my duvet.

I sigh happily, but sleep doesn’t come, I don’t feel as relaxed as I usually do, and I am reluctant to admit why. Finally, after several long minutes of tossing and turning, I admit that my kitsune, hell, I want to be closer to Neith. I can’t stop playing the moment that she got stabbed in the heart over and over again. It’s why I reacted the way that I did when she showed up bleeding, it happened too close to when she died, and I hadn’t yet dealt with that. It was one of the reasons anyway.

I know that I’m not going to be able to sleep until I am closer to her, so that I know if anything happens. The only way that I am going to do that is if I sleep outside her door, it may be a little unconventional but I can make sure that I have moved before she wakes up in the morning so she has no need to find out that I’m weird enough that I couldn’t sleep without being close.

I shake my head, yeah this is probably one of the crazier things I have done, I think as I push myself up and get off the bed, making my way over to my closet to grab some

pyjamas because on the off chance that she does catch me it will be slightly less weird if I am wearing clothes and not naked, I hope.

Please don't wake up and find me outside the door.

I pull on some loose fitting shorts, and forgo a shirt because it's bad enough that I have to wear clothes. Normally I refuse to wear more than I have to at night, which is why I usually sleep naked. Grabbing my cover off my bed and my pillow, I figure I can wrap myself up like a burrito and that way I'll stay warm, and the floor will be a bit padded, failing that I'll just sleep in my kitsune form.

I quietly open the door and then make my way down the hallway, when I turn the corner that leads to her hallway I pause, someone has had the same idea as me, and I honestly couldn't guess at this point which one of my brothers it is, it could be any of them. We are all as equally enamored with Neith for different reasons. I challenged anyone not to be after they have spent time in her presence.

Getting closer, I smile as I realize exactly who it is, I should have known.

"Couldn't sleep?" Raiden asks me, his eyes popping open.

I shake my head as I settle down next to him, "Nope, I kept seeing that damn knife go into her heart."

"Same," Raiden replies. "I don't think I have ever been so scared in my life; I was prepared to pull her soul back." I hesitate in my reply, and of course, he picks up on it and asks, "What is it?"

"I was thinking," I start.

"Careful," he smirks.

I roll my eyes and continue, “You kicked off a hell of a lot of power when you saved her, and there is a chance that Ransom’s wards may not have been enough to stop the Reaper Council from noticing.”

Ransom stills but nods, “Yeah, I thought that too.”

“So, just in case they call you to the council, which we are all following you to, and they can try to stop us,” I say fiercely before clearing my throat and continuing, “just in case, wouldn’t it be better if you started to use and practice with your other magic, so that if they demanded it of you, it’s less of a shock and you are prepared. Practice around us. There is absolutely no pressure, and if you tell me to fuck off right now, then that’s fine. I won’t bring it up again, and I completely understand. I just thought I would suggest it.”

He is silent for a moment, thinking over my words which is a good thing because it means that he is at least open to the idea and isn’t shutting down completely which is a massive step forward compared to how he used to be if this subject was ever brought up.

He sighs, “I think you are most likely right. There is a good chance that the council will have felt the power surge, and with the tier that my power level makes me, they are going to want to summon me. The question is when, they work on a different time scale to everyone else, so it could be days or months before they summon me.” He replies, “They will not take no for an answer if I refuse to reveal my power to them, and they are not above using those I love to force me to use it. I would much rather be prepared and have a handle on what I am capable of before that happens, and if it doesn’t happen, then at least I am whole again.”

I smile, happy that he’s agreeing. “Didn’t realize how much you were missing, huh?”

He shakes his head, “No, it was incredible. What color are my wings?”

“Black, like your hair, when the moon hit your feathers, they shimmered blue, purple, and like this dark green, they were fucking awesome,” I say.

Raiden has gone statue still, in a hushed voice he replies, “Are you sure? All reapers have cream, white or beige wings.”

I nod, “I know man. I’m guessing you don’t know the significance of having black ones?”

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River

He shakes his head, “No, I don’t know.”

“It’s okay. We will figure it out, and we can take it one day at a time when it comes to your other magic. If it starts to get too difficult, and then you be honest, and you fucking tell us, got it?” I ask.

“Got it,” Raiden replies, “thanks man.”

“No worries, I am excited to see what you can do,” I reply.

He chuckles, “Me too. Since when did you get so insightful?”

“Fuck off,” I grin, grabbing my pillow and launching it at his face. He ducks at the last minute, and the pillow hits Neith’s door above his head.

“Shit,” Raiden whispers, his eyes wide and still leaning against the door.

It suddenly opens, and Raiden falls backward before he can catch himself. He ends up staring up at Neith upside down. It looks so comical that I can’t help but chuckle which brings Neith’s raised eyebrow gaze to me. Fortunately, she doesn’t look pissed and looks more amused than anything else.

Neith

I hear a bang outside the door, and look up from my finished report. I was just giving

it one last read through to make sure that it made sense and that I hadn't forgotten anything important that had happened. It was strange to me to write a report without having to twist the truth and leave things out, especially if a supernatural was involved or my freaky self had done something that would make them even more convinced that I was a supernatural.

Of course, I still didn't put the fact that I died in this report, something tells me that there shouldn't be an official written down record of that anywhere. Computer systems can get hacked, and files can be stolen. I am already wanted, or I would be if the people who killed me realized that I was still alive. They don't know that though and we need to keep it that way because there is no way that a normal human could survive being blown up with a bazooka. Several people checked to see if I were alive or not anyway because they believed me to be a supernatural, and I guess were hoping that blowing me up would prove that I was. Although that doesn't really make sense, why would you blow someone up to prove that they were a supernatural? I will add that to the list of questions that we need to find out when we go after HID. My point is they all know that I am very, very dead.

Hopefully, I'm not going to have to remain 'dead' for long, but that all depends on how quickly we can sort through the leak at HID.

A quiet curse outside the door reminds me what I was doing, and I push away from my desk and walk over to it, pulling it open and trying not to laugh as Raiden falls backward and stares up at me looking shocked and a little scared. A snicker has me leaning out of the door slightly and looking at River. Both of them have their covers with them and it looks like they were getting ready to sleep outside of my door.

I cross my arms over my chest, "Why are you two doing out here?"

They look at each other and then come to some sort of decision.

“You died,” Raiden says softly as he rights himself but stays sitting on the floor, looking up at me. “I tried to find your spirit and I couldn’t find it, Neith. I don’t think I have ever panicked that much.”

“I needed to be close in case something happened again,” River says quietly, he glances away, looking slightly embarrassed as he adds, “I kept seeing it.”

I melt. There is no other word for it, these guys were so affected by what happened to me that they were willing to sleep outside of my door just to make sure I was okay.

That’s fucking adorable and makes my heart skip a beat.

It also makes my following words an easy offer.

Smiling softly, I open my door wider, “Do you really want to sleep out here?”

The guys share a look, and then both jump up with big grins on their faces.

“Hey, you’re wearing my shirt,” River says, a note of surprise in his voice.

I smile, “Of course I am.” Climbing on the bed with a yawn, and snuggling under the covers, they both start to lay their covers on the floor, making up beds and in my sleepy state I make a decision that I wouldn’t have offered if I were completely awake, although I know I’m not going to regret it. “You can get in the bed, we’re adults and the floor isn’t comfy.”

Silence reigns in the room and my eyes feel heavy, just as sleep begins to claim me, the bed dips on either side of me and I smile, thank goodness I didn’t have Betty in bed, that would have been difficult to explain, although maybe not because by now they should be used to me and Betty.

Sleep quickly settles over me as I relax, feeling far more comfortable with the two men in my bed than maybe I should be.

I become aware of voices in my room, but I'm too comfortable to do anything about it. My head is on someone's chest, their heartbeat steady beneath my ear, and someone else is wrapped around me from behind. We are all cuddled up close and I don't think I have ever been this comfortable in my life.

"What the hell?" Ransom mutters quietly, sounding amused.

"I couldn't find River and Raiden, and I got worried since they took the events of the clearing pretty hard. Neith's door was open, and when I went to close it for her, I heard a familiar snore, got curious, and found this," Doc says, and I can hear the smile in his voice.

"Lucky fuckers," Ransom grumbles, making me smile. "We should probably wake them up."

River's voice rumbles from underneath my ear, "Go away, sleeping. Comfy."

I giggle, and Raiden's arm tightens around me from behind.

"Shh Neith, we're sleeping," he mumbles, amusement in his voice.

"I have pastries and coffee," Doc tempts.

I launch myself from my warm cocoon and end up standing at the end of my bed with my eyes still closed, "I'm up."

“Your eyes are closed,” Ransom says.

“Nuh-uh,” I reply, knowing full well that my eyes are closed.

“You fuckers,” River grumbles from the bed.

Raiden groans, “I was enjoying my cuddles.”

I open one of my eyes since the other one hasn't woken up yet, and search for my leggings, finding them on the floor, I bend down to grab them and then pull them on, inadvertently flashing both Raiden and River, my ass.

“Well, I’m up now,” River teases, and I glance over my shoulder to his heated eyes, still staring at my ass.

I laugh, “Perv. Come on pastries!”

“Fine,” River says and pushes Raiden, “get up.”

“Dude, I’m more awake than you are,” Raiden replies.

Doc and Ransom start laughing as the two in the bed start a pillow fight, and I try to resist the urge to join in because rolling around on the bed with two half-naked men sounds like a dream come true, actually.

“It’s like a comedy show,” Ransom chuckles.

I look around my room to distract myself and say, “I really need to get some more clothes today.”

“We can go after we have finished our reports today,” Doc says.

I point to where my report is still on the desk, “I did mine last night before I went to sleep.”

“You didn’t need to. There was no rush to get it done,” Ransom replies with a frown.

I shrug, “It’s become a habit.”

“Huh?” Raiden asks from behind me.

“I had to get the reports to HID within the first few hours of the job being over. The only time they ever waived that was when I was unconscious for whatever reason, but even then, they wanted it within the first hour of me being awake. I have written reports with internal bleeding before, that was not fun.” I explain as I stretch out a kink in my back.

“The more I learn about the people you worked with at HID the more I want to go through unofficial channels in order to deal with them,” River growls from behind me.

“If we’re doing that then I get to play first,” my smile is sharp and deadly and there is no mistaking the kind of playing that I mean. It won’t be the fun kind, well not for them, for me it’s definitely going to be fun.

“That was hot,” River whispers theatrically.

I chuckle, “Come on, I need food.”

We all leave my room and head to the kitchen, getting raised eyebrows from Van and Reed when we all enter together.

“You found them then,” Reed says as he sips his coffee.

His dark hair is all messed up from sleeping on it and his face is still slightly rumpled, showing that he woke up not long before Doc and Ransom woke us up, it's fucking adorable.

"They were snuggled up to Neith," Doc grins as he takes a seat and helps himself to the food and coffee.

I take that as permission to do the same and load my plate up.

"Lucky fuckers," Reed comments, echoing Ransom's statement from before.

These guys are good for my ego. We all eat in silence for a while as everyone slowly starts to wake up properly, and I glance out of the huge glass doors that practically take up the entire wall opposite the table that we are sitting at and realize that it looks like it's morning.

"Did we sleep for the entire day and night?" I ask, looking around at the others.

"Yeah, we all did. I'm not surprised though, we needed it. We haven't really had a good night's sleep for a while," Evander replies.

"Good point," I agree, and take a massive bite of the flakey pastry in my hand. I have no idea what it's called. I have never really had the need to learn fancy pastry names, but I do know that it is absolutely delicious, and I could probably eat at least five more.

"If you would like to Neith, I can take you into town after breakfast," Raiden offers, he smirks, "I did my report last night, so I don't have anything to do."

"You clever fucker," I swear I hear one of them mutter, which momentarily makes me frown in confusion before I dismiss it and focus on a hopeful looking Raiden.

“Since when do you write up your reports at any time other than the very last minute?” Ransom asks him.

Raiden’s smile is proud as he looks at me, “Since the reward outweighs the pain of writing the report.”

“Wow,” Evander chuckles.

Raiden ignores him and asks me, “So, how about it?”

I nod, “Yes please, that would be great. I only need to get a few essentials and then if I can borrow a laptop from someone, I can get the rest delivered.”

“Sure, I don’t mind shopping,” Raiden replies with an easy-going smile.

“That makes one of us,” I grumble, earning myself amused smiles, “can we at least get food that might make it more bearable?”

Raiden nods, “Absolutely.”

“Deal,” I reply, and I push away from the table, and turn to head out of the door, “I guess I should go and get dressed then.”

“Wait, before you go,” Evander says, and I pause hearing the tension in his voice and turn back to face him.

He looks very serious and as I look around at all of the other guys, I realize that he is not the only one and that all of the amusement that was on their faces moments ago has disappeared.

I stand up straighter and cautiously reply, “Okay?”

“Ty rang us before we went to bed, and he said that a few of the other teams had heard of your track record and had shown an interest in having you on their team,” Evander starts to explain.

The tension drains from my body, and I smile, “Oh, you had me worried for a moment then I thought it was something serious.”

“It is,” Reed says bluntly.

Ransom takes over the explanation, “Unlike humans, supes do it a bit differently. If two teams wish to have a certain person on their team, and neither one backs down, then one of the teams can challenge for the Choosing. It doesn’t happen very often anymore because usually, everyone respects the choice of the individual.”

“And it’s not so necessary to make sure that the teams are well-matched now that we aren’t in Trieneliea,” Raiden adds.

I am going to make sure that I ask questions about that later on, but right now I feel like there is a much more important question to ask, “So, if someone challenges you guys for me like I am something to own, then I have no choice but to wait and see who wins me like I’m a prized fucking cow?”

The whole table winces.

Evander clears his throat and carries on explaining, “Not exactly, you have to compete in a series of tasks, some by yourself and some with the teams that are interested in you. The tasks are dangerous for supernaturals, but for you, they risk being deadly. When you have passed all tasks, the scroll inscribes the best team for you, and it’s not like, ‘Oh, you guys will kind of fit;’ it’s like a soul connection, and you are bonded for life. No one can deny the connection, and it comes with certain perks too, and an extra level of respect in supernatural society, and especially in the

realms, if the team were ever to travel to them.”

I take a deep breath, “Okay, I sort of like that bit, I guess. I am assuming that because this is a supernatural thing, I can’t just tell the other team or teams to fuck off and that I want to be on your team?”

I need the clarification.

“No,” Evander grimaces.

“But it’s only a possibility that someone might invoke the Choosing. It’s not a certainty,” Doc says.

I detect something in his voice that makes me ask, “What aren’t you telling me?”

“It isn’t a certainty, I didn’t lie, but we are pretty sure that one of the teams that have expressed an interest in you is a team that fucking hates us for no other reason than we are better than them,” Doc explains.

“So there is a chance that they could invoke the Choosing, which could potentially kill me, just to get at you?” I ask.

Reed nods, “Yes.”

“If that happens, fates be damned, I will make their lives a living fucking hell,” I growl.

“Deal,” River replies, his usual mirth missing from his eyes.

“No choice,” I mutter. The guys shake their heads. I can see how much all of them hate this, and that takes the edge off slightly.

Slightly, but not enough. The current knot of anger, and fear at the thought of being trapped in a situation I have no control over threatens to stir memories that I need to stay buried, walking through these emotions is not going to fucking work this time they are too raw, too triggering. The voices get louder as if they are trying to help me drown out the threatening memories too, but it's no good.

There is only one thing for it.

“Neith?” Raiden asks, his dark eyes swirling with concern.

“Have you guys got a gym?” I ask.

Griff frowns, seemingly as confused as the others, but he answers me anyway, saying, “Yes.”

“Show me?” I ask as I stand from the table, bouncing on my toes.

He nods and gets up; I follow him, aware that the others are following as well.

I glance up at River, “Do you have some headphones and something I can listen to music on?”

He nods and jogs in a different direction to the one that we were going in. I love that he didn't ask any questions. He catches back up to us as we move further into the house and then push through big double doors that lead to a state of the art gym, I am too fucking mad to notice much else about the room but I zero in on the bags in the corner.

“I just need a minute,” I say, hoping they don't ask me questions.

“Of course, we will leave you to it,” Doc says firmly, as if he is warning the others to

do just that.

River hands me a set of on ear headphones, and his phone, his music app already loaded, I scroll through the playlists until I find a heavy rock one and nod my thanks. As I'm putting them on the music already playing, I catch Evander's confused look.

I'm not surprised, I have never been very good at being told what to do, and I used to get crazy emotional and pretty much have tantrums if I was forced to do something, serious things, not things like homework and shit. Basically, I was very immature about it.

I still explode, especially when it's something as serious as this is. It's hardwired into me and has also become a trauma response, thanks to my past. Under normal circumstances, I can push it away until I'm calm enough to deal with it. However, these aren't normal circumstances, this has the potential to be a life and death situation, and if it does come about, then, the likelihood is it is because the team has a problem with the guys.

That's pathetic.

I don't explain to Van that I had to learn to control my emotions this way, because he is going to ask why and I am not ready to share that part of my life, not all the bad came from Dimitri, some of it came from before him.

I shudder and shake my arms out to hide it, again it would cause questions I don't want to answer.

With the music blaring in my ears and the voices buzzing loudly in my head, I do the simplest and quickest stretch that I can get away with, just so that I don't end up cursing myself later. I start hitting the bag, running through my usual routine, and then switching it up. It would be so much better if it were fighting back, and I didn't

have time to think .

Neith

I don't even bother wrapping my hands. I need the bite of pain right now to keep me grounded and stop me from flying off into the panic attack that I can already feel building. It has been a very long time since I had one, I am now able to go into situations that would have caused a panic attack before without it causing any issues for me, and I worked really fucking hard to ensure that I wasn't at a disadvantage just because of my past.

But the last few days have been intense as fuck. I have found out my whole life has been a lie, and I don't even know the extent of what that means, I have died twice, nearly died again twice, I have been transported to a different mother fucking realm, and once again fought my life. I can do things I shouldn't be able to do, I have a magic fucking sword, and I have had to reveal more about my past in the last few days than I have revealed to anyone ever. At this point, after everything that I have been through, these fucking trials, whatever they are, will be a fucking breeze.

I have had to talk about Dimitri, and that means I've to think about that past.

The past is not a good place to dwell, nothing good comes from doing so.

I know that and yet I have been thinking backward more than I care to admit. It has made me vulnerable, and it means that I have triggered, or almost triggered, a panic attack.

These thoughts circle around my brain as I continue to beat the shit out of the bag in front of me. The voices joining in and creating a cacophony that I try to drown out.

My world narrows so that all I am aware of is the music blaring in my ears and the rhythmic pounding of my fists on the bag. I am aware that my knuckles have split, and I am also aware that I am quickly becoming a sweaty mess, although I am grateful that I am in leggings and a shirt instead of jeans. I hope River will let me pinch one of his shirts again. I like sleeping in them, and this one is gross now. If I wash it, then it's not going to smell like him, and that's the main appeal for me.

Oh, maybe I can get a collection going and steal one from each of them. That would be really fucking cool and has now become my new mission.

My turmoil has obviously calmed somewhat if I am thinking about stealing some of the guy's clothes.

The fear and anger that the thought of being forced into a situation that I can't control triggered slowly subsides, and I see the situation for what it is. I am still really fucking pissed that if the situation does arise, I have to take part, but the optimal word in that sentence is 'if'. There is a chance that it may not happen. It's a supernatural event, and there really isn't anything I can do about it. I like the sound of the perks though and I really like the thought of knowing one hundred percent that I belong with the guys on this team, and that if the scroll says that there is fuck all that anyone can do about it.

I stop, my breaths coming fast, and my body slick with sweat. For a moment, I just stare at the bag and wince. It's smeared with blood and looks pretty macabre. For fuck sake, I need to find something to clean this off, I really have to stop ruining the guy's shit. First, the wall, and now this. Turning around and hoping that I can find something down here to clean it, I freeze when I see all of the guys still in the gym and just watching me, all of them looking really concerned. I pull River's headphones off my ears, and I am immediately surrounded by the silence and missing the thrumming beat of the music.

My smile is decidedly sheepish when I say, “I am really sorry about the state of the bag; I will clean it if someone can point me in the direction of the cleaning supplies?”

“I don’t give a shit about that,” Raiden starts, moving closer, “are you okay?”

They immediately surround me, and although I like it, my first thought is that I must really fucking stink, thanks to my impromptu workout, but none of them seem to mind at all, so I move on to more important matters.

“I’m okay now. I just had to work through some stuff,” I explain. I struggle to find the words to say what I want to. I don’t want them to think I usually react like this, “I’m not normally so quick to fight it out. Some things I have a harder time with than others, and being forced or trapped into a situation is still something that I have a strong reaction to.”

Evander’s eyebrows climb even higher on his forehead before he catches on to the hidden meaning in my words, and they dip into a frown.

Before any of them can question me on it though, Doc steps forward and holds out his hands, “Can I heal your hands please?”

I pause for a second, only because it hadn’t even occurred to me that he could do that for me even though he has healed me several times now. Also, they don’t hurt enough for me to need them healed, and I am about to tell him that when I catch sight of his expression, I think he needs to heal my hands more than I need them healed.

I gently place my hands in his, grimacing slightly when I realize how bad they are, whoops. I probably should have felt that, and it definitely explains why they are all looking at me so concerned. Well, that and the fact that I just lost my shit on a punching bag.

“Yes, please,” I reply to him with another slightly sheepish smile.

Doc returns it and within moments I feel a wash of magic go over me and I wriggle my fingers as the pain that I hadn’t even realized that I was feeling subsides, and then disappears completely.

“Better?” Doc asks, his thumbs rubbing the backs of my hands soothingly.

My hands look absolutely tiny in his tattooed ones, and I find that undeniably attractive. I gently pull them away, wriggling my fingers out of his grip this time.

Nodding, I reply, “Yes, thank you. Much better.”

He smiles, “Wrap your hands next time.”

I smirk and answer without actually agreeing, “I will always have the best intention to wrap my hands before I beat the shit out of a punching bag.”

The guys all know what I have done by answering Doc that way, and they either grin or chuckle.

Doc’s eyes sparkle as he replies, “Clever Neith, very clever.”

I just shrug, I am not going to answer how he is hoping that I will. Nine times out of ten, I will wrap my hands before I fight the punching bag, although when I do wrap my hands before I use the punching bag, I’m working out, I’m not freaking out, and if I’m freaking out, there is no way that I’m going to be able to make myself stop and wrap my hands first. I think he understands that though, because he doesn’t push it anymore and drops the subject.

“I’m sorry that we sort of sprung that on you, Nene,” Evander says, wincing, “I just

figured that you would rather know in advance than have it sprung on you out of the blue and not have enough time to get used to it.”

I nod, “Yeah, you were right. I have time to get used to the possibility of it happening now. Besides, it is only a possibility, and there is no point worrying too much about something that may not happen.”

“I would react the same,” River replies honestly, making me feel a bit better about my reaction.

“I think you may find that in the unlikely event that the event is triggered, then the majority of us are not going to have very good reactions,” Ransom adds, his arms crossed over his chest. “The only thing that would make it slightly okay is that as one of the teams that want you, we would be there with you.”

“For all of it?” I ask. I need as much information as I can get about this thing that could threaten my life next. Even if it doesn’t happen, it still seems like the smart thing to do in this situation.

Ransom shakes his head, but Griff is the one who answers, “No, we would all be staying in the same building, it is this massive castle in one of the pocket realms, that they use specifically for this. Some of the tasks that you do, you would do with us, some of them you would do with the other teams or team, and some you would do by yourself.”

I nod, “Okay, so at least I wouldn’t be completely cut off from you guys then. What about the sleeping situation while we are at the castle? I wouldn’t have to share space with the other teams, right?”

In the grand scheme of things, that probably doesn’t seem like the biggest thing to be concerned about right now, but it is something that I need to clear up as soon as

possible. I do not do well-sharing space, especially sleeping space, with others.

Apart from the guys apparently, but then for some inexplicable reason I have felt safe with them from the moment that I met them, obviously I have always felt safe with Evander, but the others too.

Doc shakes his head, his eyes flash with questions, but once again he doesn't ask them and simply answers my question instead, "You will have your own rooms. There is quite a lot involved, and some things are still done in accordance with the old ways of Trieneliea, so it doesn't make sense for this world."

Raiden nods, "I think that is why it's not being used that often anymore. It wasn't meant for the Earth realm and the supernatural police force. It was meant for the elite warrior teams that would be the first line of defense against the threats to the realms."

"Elite warrior teams?" I ask, aware that we have gone off track but incredibly curious.

Raiden nods, "Yeah, not everyone was even strong enough to be put in the teams. Not the destined ones like these are. It's what everyone worked towards, to be chosen for an elite team, but not everyone was good enough."

I frown, "I get why that was needed for Trieneliea. Honestly, that makes a lot of sense, but why was it brought over here? The SID teams are dealing with shit, but nothing that is on the same scale as I imagine happens in entire realms. How many teams have been chosen this way over here? How many teams are technically Elite teams?"

The others all look to Raiden, and it becomes even more obvious that he is the one who does the research and has the most knowledge about things like this as he answers my questions, "I think at first it was a tradition that we tried to hold onto.

You have to remember that supes live for a very long time, the majority of supes that are alive today came from Trieneliea, and the war is still extremely fresh in their minds.”

I look around at them, “Wait, are any of you from Trieneliea?”

they all shake their heads, and Doc replies, “No, we were born here and met in the magical academy. My older brother is from there though, most of my family were born there.”

“Same,” Raiden replies simply, not giving any more information away. I’m starting to think that his family is a complicated subject.

“I have family that didn’t escape when they could,” Reed replies, and I look at him shocked, he adds, “my aunt and uncle didn’t make it to the gates in time.”

“Wow,” I reply, “I’m sorry.”

Reed nods but doesn’t say anything else. I want to ask questions, lots of questions but I know that now isn’t the time, and I make a mental note to ask Raiden more about it when we do that research, and he finally shows me the library.

“Mom and Dad were there,” Evander says.

I frown, “Really? How come I didn’t know that?”

Van shrugs, “They don’t like talking about it. They have only really mentioned it once, and it was new years, so they had both had a few drinks at the time. The subject was very quickly changed, and when I asked about it the next day, they just ignored me.”

“Oh,” I reply since I don’t really know what else to say.

“My Parents and my older siblings were all born there. I’m the youngest so I am the only one that was born over here. There are some family members that refused to cross over, they remained in Trieneliea, and we have no idea what happened to them,” River replies to my questioning look.

I frown, “To me it seems very much in the past but even then, it was only really ten years or so before I was born. To supernaturals that live for hundreds of years it must feel like it was only a couple of years ago. It must still be very painful.”

Reed nods, “Yes. For many, it is still too raw to talk about, and I believe that to a certain extent, many want to, and in fact, need to protect the secrets of Trieneliea. Unfortunately, a large number of humans have proven themselves to be problematic where supernaturals are concerned and shouldn’t have access to all of their secrets and information.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” I reply honestly, as I think about all of the people that I’ve come across who have very negative views on supernaturals. Hell, my little house that I love is in a small town where the opinion of supernaturals is very low, mostly due to ignorance or scaremongering done by certain news outlets. Unfortunately, towns like that aren’t unusual. Even HID, who is supposed to be there to support the SID in their investigation, and help when supes turn up on their investigations, even if they don’t do what they are supposed to, they are corrupt.

I do hope that is going to change though, I hope that we are going to be able to weed out the bad and get it functioning how it’s supposed to. I really do think that if we can manage that then it would take a lot of fear away that humans automatically view supes with. The simple fact is that humans are no longer top of the food chain, and the majority of them don’t like that or fear it.

I am aware that I am referring to humans as something other, but I always have when I think about this subject, I have never felt the way that the majority of humans seem to feel about supernaturals.

Griff interrupts my inner musings by adding, “My parents were there too, I was only a baby when we left but I was born there.”

“That’s so cool,” I reply. “It seems that there are a lot of people that are our age whose parents most likely came over in the evacuation. Does no one have any idea what happened after everyone left? What happened to those that were left behind?”

Raiden shakes his head, “Unless someone who has a higher clearance than us knows something, no. All of the gates that were once opened are now sealed shut. There is a team that is working on trying to open the seals, but they haven’t gotten very far.”

“Not everyone agrees with them reopening the sealed doors, the war could still be raging, and it would be too easy for it to spill over into this realm,” Reed states.

“It sounds fucking complicated,” I reply, still frowning. I turn my attention back to Raiden and apologize, “I’m sorry. I derailed our whole conversation, then. You were explaining what you knew about how many Elite teams we currently have here?”

Raiden frowns for a second and I can practically see his brain reorganizing itself so that all the information on Trieneliea gets pushed to the back and the information he has on the Elite teams gets pulled forward.

“Okay, so when we said that it was rare that it happened, we meant it. I think in the forty years that we have been here, there have been maybe four Choosing’s, possibly less,” Raiden explains to me.

My eyes widen, “Okay, I definitely didn’t think that you meant that rare.”

Raiden nods as he opens his mouth to say something else, though Evander interrupts him.

“There are maybe around the same number of elite teams that came through with the others from Trieneliea to make sure that they were safe,” Van says.

I stand up straighter, “Wait there are real Elite teams that fought in the war here?”

Van nods, “Yeah, but they are extremely private, I have never met or seen a team. No one knows their names or anything, apart from the people that came over with them, and honestly, they have so much respect for the original Elite teams that they have kept quiet.”

My shoulders sink slightly, and Raiden smiles sympathetically, “I was really disappointed when I learned that as well. I would have loved to have spoken to someone from an Elite team to learn how they worked, how all of it worked.”

“Yeah, maybe one day. If I go through this Choosing though, it would have been really handy to speak to someone from an Elite original team. What about the four teams that have become Elite since the gates closed?” I ask curiously.

“They all started off in SID and then very quickly got drafted into protecting high-profile supernaturals around the world, not necessarily the supernaturals that are high-profile in the human world but in the supernatural world. For example, your friend Ernie, he is extremely high up in the supernatural world and very well respected but hardly known in the human one.” Doc explains.

I nod, “Yeah, that makes sense.”

Neith

“Exactly. It’s not what they would have been doing, but it is the best option they have in this realm,” Raiden adds.

Something occurs to me, so of course I veer the conversation off in a different direction, “Wait, so if I went through these tasks and didn’t die,” several growls sound throughout the gym but I ignore them and continue to ask my question, “we would all become an Elite team and get these extra perks? I know that seems like an obvious question but if I am the one that is going through it and doing the trials why does the whole team get the perks?”

“Because the team will be going through trials as well when they have to join you on your tasks, the whole team is being tested, not just you,” Reed replies.

I nod, “Okay, that makes more sense. So, we would all be named on the scroll as the perfect team and get the perks?”

“Yeah, I think so. It’s been neigh on a decade since the last one, and they don’t really talk about what the perks are. Which makes sense really, it wouldn’t be wise to let your enemies know what your strengths are,” Raiden points out.

“No, it wouldn’t,” Griff replies.

“We don’t really know much about any of it, do we?” Ransom says with a frown, looking worried.

River shakes his head, “I have only seen one and heard bits and pieces here and there. Presumably, if it happened, then we would know more.”

“I can do some research and see what I can find out about it. Hopefully, I can find some more solid information than the maybes that we currently have,” Raiden offers.

“That’s a good idea.” Evander agrees.

“So, if these jackasses do start it off, then would we be able to talk to the new Elite teams, or are they as elusive as the originals?” I ask, returning to my original line of thinking and hoping that they manage to follow where I’m trying to go with it.

Raiden shakes his head, “It’s not likely, but as far as I know, they are only hard to get hold of because of their current jobs, not because we don’t actually know who they are.”

“So, it would be possible?”

Raiden shrugs, “I don’t see why not. As I said before though, the Choosing is very rare these days, and they would be pissing a lot of people off if they pulled in a person that was known to be human.”

Now that I am calm and not freaking out, the name seems familiar to me, and my eyes widen as I ask for clarification, “Wait, what is it called?”

The guys share a look, and Griff answers, “The Choosing, why?”

“Shit, I watched one of them with Dimitri; it looked brutal, if I am being completely honest. If I got pulled into one of them, I think it would be safe to say that the odds would definitely be stacked against me,” I say, frowning heavily.

There has got to be something wrong with the way that I'm made though because I can't lie to myself and there is a fissure of excitement that goes through me, at the thought of taking part in the Choosing. I had a similar feeling when I watched it with Dimitri.

"Ty is trying to dissuade anyone from actually triggering the Choosing. He thinks that seeing you with our team and how well we work together will make people back off, and if they don't, they will only offer you a place on their team and not trigger the Choosing," Evander explains.

"We hope," Griff adds drily.

I have to admit that I'm with Griff on this one. I am not sure that Ty's idea of practically parading me in front of all the other teams that may or may not be interested in recruiting me is a good idea. Not that I know how, he is planning to make sure that any teams that may be interested see me in a happy team with Evander and the others.

"How is he planning to make sure that the teams that are interested in me see that I'm happy with your team?" I ask.

"He needs us to head into the training academy on Monday anyway, so he thought that would be the perfect opportunity to bring you," Reed says.

I smile, "Okay sounds good. Since I am on your team now, I probably should learn about everything that entails, and I know from the brief conversation that I had with Navy that you guys do stuff at the training academy. It would be good to see what exactly you do, although I don't know how I would be able to help in that situation, I haven't had any formal training."

River frowns, "You haven't?"

I shake my head, “No. I think they were hoping that I would get myself killed before the deal had run out, and then I wouldn’t be their problem anymore. Unfortunately for them, I learn really quickly, and when the subject is something that I am interested in, then I throw everything into it. I have learned enough over the years and studied enough that I am extremely well versed on the human laws and most of the supernatural ones.”

“That’s impressive,” Reed compliments.

“You shouldn’t have had to learn that yourself though,” Evander frowns, “if you weren’t who you are then you could have easily been a danger to yourself and others.”

I nod, “I know, that’s why I learned what I could. There were a lot of things that I shouldn’t have had to do.” I change the subject, not wanting to get too into that statement, “What is it that you do at the academy?”

“Why don’t we go and grab some lunch, and then we can explain a bit more about what it is that we do?” Ransom suggests.

“What’s the time?” I ask, surprised that it’s lunchtime already since, as far as I’m concerned, we only just had breakfast.

“It’s just gone one,” Ransom replies and then adds, “You were beating that punching bag for a while.”

I wrinkle my nose and then smile sheepishly, “Whoops.”

Raiden chuckles, “Don’t worry about it. You must be hungry after that workout though, let’s go grab some food.”

“Erm, I am but first I need a shower, I feel gross,” I point out.

“Yeah, you do stink a bit,” Evander teases with a grin, and I chuckle, smacking him on the chest as I move past the mountains of man muscle that had surrounded me.

“I’ll meet you guys in the kitchen.” I say, choosing not to insult Van back; I’ll save it up and get him when he least expects it, like an adult.

I’m not entirely sure that is what an adult would do, but as I am technically an adult, and I would do it, I’m going to say that it is the adult thing to do.

Wow, that sentence was just slightly convoluted.

When I get to my room, I rummage through my clothes to find the cleanest set and realize that I have no clean underwear, although my bra is still good. Going commando it is, I guess. I take a quick shower, making double sure that I don’t actually stink, since that is a major concern of mine. It takes me no time at all to get it all done and as I begin to leave my room, I turn back around and grab my report from the desk to give to Evander. I really hope that Raiden is still okay to take me into town because I need supplies and to find out where their washing machine is. Although the location of the washing machine has nothing to do with Raiden taking me into town, it’s just a stray thought.

This is of course the thought that is playing through my mind as I walk into the kitchen, which means the first words out of my mouth sound really out of left field to the guys.

“Hey, we haven’t got much. We need to make a trip to the store to grab some more food, but we have enough supplies to make some sandwiches. Help yourself,” Evander says.

My mind is still focused on what I was thinking about when I walked in so instead of replying I ask, “Where’s your washing machine?”

River, bless him, doesn’t skip a beat or look at me slightly confused like some of the others are and simply answers, “It’s through that door there. We should have probably shown you that when you first arrived.”

“Thanks,” I smile, and then head over to the counter where they have loads of different fixings for sandwiches laid out. “To be fair, a lot has happened since I first arrived.”

River nods, “Yeah, that’s true. I don’t think we have ever been quite this busy.”

“You’re welcome,” I smirk. I quickly throw a sandwich together and then join the guys at the table.

I’m about halfway through my sandwich when Griff starts the conversation from the gym back up.

“We were explaining about what we do at the training academy,” Griff says, clearly wanting someone to carry on the conversation.

Doc nods, “Yeah, we were.” He looks at me and then starts to explain, “We teach classes. Most of us have a class, but they are flexible since we are an active team. Many teams help to train the recruits, which can range in ages, Navy is probably one of the oldest recruits but not by much. If I remember correctly, she is around your age, and there has been an influx of recruits in that age range recently. There are, of course, some people that teach at the academy full time. We can’t risk leaving the place without any instructors if everyone happens to be on a job.”

I nod, swallowing the bite of sandwich that I have just taken and reply, “Yeah that

makes sense. So, what do you all teach?”

Doc smiles, “I teach a medical class that deals with a variety of different supes and their needs if they are injured, as well as the intricacies of human healing. It’s important that the recruits know how to heal without using magic, you never know what could happen, and if for some reason they find themselves without their magic then I think that it is important for them to know how to stop bleeding and that sort of thing.”

I nod, “Absolutely. If they come across a human as well, they will need to know how to heal without magic as not all humans’ systems are accepting of being healed that way and it can cause more problems.”

“Exactly,” Doc replies with a smile.

“I teach a class with the shifters and how they can use their talents to help at a crime scene. There is more to it than that, but that’s the basics of what I do,” River explains.

“I teach flight and combat whilst flying,” Griff says. Apparently deciding that is all the information that I need.

Raiden clears his throat, gaining attention, “I teach weapons, pretty much every weapon that you can think of, and ways to incorporate your magic into them so that they work in your favor.”

“Nothing to do with the spirit realm?” I ask curiously.

Shadows cross his features, and he replies with a shake of his head, “No, reapers tend to make people feel uncomfortable, so any mention of our magic doesn’t tend to go down very well.”

“Fucking idiots,” I reply, rolling my eyes.

Just like that, the shadows disappear, and he chuckles.

“I teach advanced magic and warding,” Ransom says. “Obviously, I tone down the strength of what I am able to do.”

“We all do,” Evander replies, “We are all stronger than the norm, and although everyone knows that, no one knows to what extent, and we need to keep it that way.”

I nod, “Got it. No bragging about how awesome you all are.”

That makes them all chuckle, which in turn makes me smile. I like listening to their laughter. There is something rich and warming about it, it gives me the happy feels.

“Thanks, Neith. I teach the water supes, both in and out of the water. How to use their water in a combat situation, and their shifted forms as well,” Evander replies, answering the question that I was, of course, going to ask him next.

“That’s really cool,” I reply. Looking at Reed, I raise my eyebrow in question.

He smiles, but there is no warmth in it as he replies, “No one would take a class from me. My power is too much for them, and it makes them wary.”

“That’s why I am the weapons trainer instead of Reed, even though with his mastery of swords, he should be teaching the sword classes at least,” Raiden adds.

“You are just as skilled as I am with a sword,” Reed replies.

“Their loss, I still don’t get why people are scared of you,” I say, as I take another bite of my sandwich.

Reed's smile is genuine this time as he replies, "I know."

"As I said before though, I don't think I would be able to offer much in the way of helping to train people, not in the official ways anyway."

"You may find that you have more to offer than you think you do," Griff says, "especially since you are human. Well, technically."

I nod, "Yeah actually that's a really good point. Although I'm not sure that I can offer a true human perspective, not only because I don't share the views or fears of most humans. Even those who do like supernaturals and work and live alongside them seem to have a natural in-built fear, or I guess cautiousness is a better word for it. I don't have that. I have never had that."

"That's probably because you are actually a supernatural yourself, so they don't feel 'other' to you like we do to humans," Raiden suggests.

I nod, "Yeah, you are probably right. That doesn't really help with my place at the training academy."

The guys all look thoughtful for a moment before Evander suggests, "Why don't you shadow us in our lessons for the moment so you can get a feel of it? You said you didn't get any official training with HID so there might be some things that you can brush up on too."

I smirk, "That was a really clever way to say that there may be gaps in my knowledge and it would be a good idea to figure that out."

Evander grins, "Well, you do need to learn some of the protocols that we use at SID since they are different from what was used at HID."

I nod, “Yeah, you make a really good point. I don’t want to make a silly mistake and embarrass myself or mess something up and compromise a situation.”

“I’m happy to have you in the classes; it will be good to double-check where you are with the physical training as well,” Griff adds.

“I should be reasonably okay with that sort of stuff. As far as I am aware, the only thing that I need to brush up on is my sword skills, but I could be wrong, and there may be other things that I need to work on,” I reply honestly.

“We should probably get you training with that enchanted sword of yours. You said that you were rusty,” Reed suggests. “Training with an enchanted sword is different than training with a normal sword. I feel like it will be even more so with your one since it seems like it has quite a big personality.”

I nod, “Yeah, I am rusty with normal swords, and I would love it if you could give me a refresher and some extra training. For some reason, I think that my sword is going to give me more trouble than it is going to help me.”

Raiden frowns, “I think that you are probably right about that. It would be better if we had some more knowledge about where it came from. Even if we knew what realm you picked it up in, that would help us figure out how it works and if there are any special gifts it has. Even if there are commands that are supposed to be used in a particular language.”

My eyes widen, “Holy crap, I had no idea about any of that. I think while Reed is teaching me how to wield the sword, could you teach me everything that I need to know about them history wise and all of that sort of thing, please?”

Raiden nods and smiles, “Absolutely, I haven’t looked at the subject for a while, so it will be interesting to have a look at it again.”

“Thank you. It isn’t a subject that I ever looked at.” Turning to Reed I add, “It might be best if I practice with a normal sword for a bit and get a feel for them again.”

Reed nods in agreement and opens his mouth to say something but gets interrupted by Van.

Evander chuckles, and everyone looks at him questioningly, he shrugs and explains, “I’m sorry, I just find it really hard to believe that you are that rusty when it comes to fighting with a sword. You always had a knack for it, no actually, it was more than that you were a damn natural and I’d bet on par or even better than Reed is.”

“Seriously?” Doc asks, sounding shocked.

Evander nods, “Yeah.”

“Well, now I want to sit in on that training session with Reed,” River says, bouncing in his seat.

I smile, “I haven’t fought properly with a sword for a few years. I am very definitely rusty.”

Evander shrugs, still smiling, “I think that your definition of rusty and everyone else’s may be slightly different.”

Neith

“Maybe,” I reply. I have always found swords easy to wield, any weapon really. I just like deadly things. “Would it be okay if we wait to do sword practice?”

Reed nods, “Of course.”

“Thanks. I really need to head into town and pick up some more clothes,” I look at Raiden, “if you still want to take me? If not, can someone lend me a vehicle and directions.”

Raiden smirks, “Of course, I still want to take you. Are you ready to go now?”

I nod, “Yeah, I just need to go upstairs and get my card.”

“Okay, I’ll meet you by the front door,” Raiden replies as he gets up.

“I guess the rest of us should get on with our reports,” Griff mutters, not sounding very pleased at the prospect.

I pull out the report that I wrote, folded, and put in my pocket, his words reminding me that I have it on me, “That reminds me, this is my report. Let me know if it's not detailed enough, or if you guys need it written differently, and I will rewrite it.”

Evander takes it off me with a smile, “I’m sure that it will be fine. When you get back, one of us will lend you a laptop, and you can order everything else on that. Get yourself a laptop too.”

“And a phone,” Griff grunts the order, and it is an order and not a request. His voice softens slightly as he adds, “I want you to be able to get hold of us whenever you need to.”

I nod smiling, my heart warming at his concern but I can’t help but point out, “It wouldn’t have helped me on my walk last night. There was no cell service in whatever realm that damn imp dropped me in. But I will get one, I’m hoping that last night’s occurrence was a one off.”

“I fucking hope so,” Ransom mutters. He changes the subject before I can question him on it, “Technically, that happened not last night but the night before. It was morning by the time we went to bed, and then we slept through the following night, waking up this morning.”

I wrinkle my nose, pulling a confused face, and say, “Whatever you say, that just hurt my brain.”

The table chuckles, and I start to walk out to go and get my card. I wasted quite a lot of time with my freakout this morning, and I desperately need to get some stuff. Not just clothes either, I need some more shampoo and conditioner thanks to the number of times that I have had to wash my hair since I arrived here.

As I’m walking out of the room, I hear Raiden say smugly, “It’s not my fault I thought ahead.”

I clearly missed the first part of the conversation, but his words are met with a lot of good-natured name calling that he effortlessly and joyously returns. I head up the stairs with a smile on my face as I listen to their laughter.

As I step into my room, my eyes instantly land on Winston.

“Are you okay?” he asks me immediately.

I have no idea if that question means that he knows about my trip to the realm or not, so I ask him, “Er, I’m good, actually. Do you know where the imps sent me?”

Winston’s eyes widen slightly, and he asks, “The imps sent you somewhere?”

“I thought that’s what you were referring to?”

Winston shakes his head, “No, I was referring to the Choosing.”

“You know about that?” I ask, taking a seat on the bed next to him.

He nods, “Yes, of course I do. I am a spirit guide.”

“So you know all futures then?”

He shakes his head, “No, I am only privy to certain futures. This is more of a knowing when there might be a threat to you, plus your distress called to me and the other spirit guides.”

I frown, “It did? Has it always done that?”

Winston nods, “Yes, but it wasn’t until the bazooka incident that you have had the strength to see us. I imagine that it has something to do with your magic making itself known more.”

I smile, “Got it, that makes sense, I suppose. Do you have any advice for me? Is it likely to happen? Am I worrying about nothing? Do I need to prepare? Am I even going to survive it as a human?”

Winston's eyes widen slightly at my barrage of questions, but he only takes a moment to gather his thoughts before he starts to answer them.

"I can't tell you much, not because I don't want to but because I physically can't, I don't know. As you know, there are things at play that even we, as your spirit guides, don't understand. I can tell you that no matter what happens, whether the Choosing gets triggered or not, that it is the way that it is supposed to happen," Winston replies. He then adds, "Preparing is always a good idea."

I nod, "Yeah, you make a good point. I suppose it is better to be over prepared rather than underprepared."

"Exactly," Winston replies with warmth in his eyes. "There's something else that you need to remember, Neith."

"Yes?" I ask, slightly suspiciously, when he doesn't immediately carry on the conversation.

"You asked me if you would survive it as a human," he repeats my own words. He doesn't give me a chance to say anything else or confirm anything, and he continues, "You aren't human, Neith. I imagine that if the Choosing were triggered, you would survive it. Perhaps not easily, since it is designed to be difficult and train warriors and also because your supernatural side is only just beginning to reveal itself, but I would be extremely surprised if your destiny were to die in the Choosing and not come back."

I am unsure whether to be reassured or not by his words. He hasn't really answered whether the Choosing is going to happen, but then that's because he doesn't really know. He seems to be working a lot on assumptions and I'm not sure whether that is a good thing.

“Okay,” I reply simply because I don’t really have much to say to that, and change the subject, “Wallace helped me after the whole dead thing at the clearing in the woods, and I am certain that he gave Raiden some advice on how to save me too because I can feel his magic within me.” I will admit that I am slightly fishing for information, Raiden never did tell me exactly why I can feel his magic, and why my intuition is telling me that he did something big in order to save me. I continue my thought process and ask, “What is the best way to say thank you to him? Wallace, I mean not Raiden. I can thank Raiden the usual way.”

Winston smiles a raccoon kind of smile and says, “You don’t need to do anything to show that you are grateful for his help apart from saying a simple thank you. That is always appreciated. However, if you were interested in doing something, he is partial to cinnamon buns.”

My eyebrows inch up in surprise, “You guys can eat?”

Winston chuckles, “Of course we can.”

I pull a face because in what way is it supposed to be obvious to me that my spirit guides can eat? They are spirit guides, so spirits, so I assumed that they didn’t eat?

“There is clearly a lot that I need to learn about spirit guides,” I mutter.

Winston nods, “Indeed. Now, what was this about the imps and another realm?”

“Oh shit, yeah,” I start. “That happened not last night, but I guess it was the early hours of yesterday morning.” I frown before deciding that it doesn’t really matter and continue, “I went for a walk in the woods to sort through this whole I’m a supe thing and got approached by Flinotive. He started chatting shit about me having to complete a task.”

Winston interrupts me, “You could understand him?” I nod, and he adds, “Interesting.”

I raise my eyebrow but decide not to question him and to continue on with my story.

“He sent me to this other realm and told me that I had three hours to get to the door and get out or I would be stuck there,” I go on to explain everything that happened while I was there, describing it in as much detail as I possibly can since I am hoping that he will recognize something about it and be able to tell me where the fuck Flin sent me since Flin himself seems to be keeping quiet on the subject.

Again, I don’t mention the man that I saw, I don’t know why. I want to keep him to myself, as weird as that is.

The more that I talk and explain about where I was, the wider Winston’s eyes get, and by the time I have finally stopped talking, I am half expecting him to accuse me of making the whole fantastical thing up because even to me, it sounds extremely far fetched and I was fucking there.

“Of all the places that I expected you to describe, that was not one of them,” Winston eventually says.

I sit up straighter, “Do you know where that imp sent me? Because he was irritatingly vague when I asked him and then he fucked off.”

“Luesidious,” Winston replies.

I stare at him blankly because I have absolutely no idea where or what that is, for all I know he could be cursing me out and not naming the realm that I was in.

“Lewee, what?” I ask.

Winston rolls his eyes, and speaks very slowly as he says, “Lew-ee-s-id-u-us.”

“Luesidious?” I repeat back to him, entirely unsure if I am saying it right.

He nods, “Yeah, that’s it. I have no idea why the imp would have sent you there though. Since you are back and managed to complete the task, I am assuming that you could breathe there, you didn’t find a plant or something to help you?”

I frown, “No, I didn’t have time to do anything like that, what with being chased, nearly eaten, and then only just getting to the door on time. I could breathe normally anyway. Was I not supposed to be able to?”

Winston shakes his little furry head, “No, not many supes can breathe there without an enchantment, or using one of the native plants like a mask to breathe through that filters out the poisons.”

“Poisons?” I exclaim, slightly alarmed by the fact that I was there for three hours and breathing in the apparently poisonous air.

Winston waves his little hand shaped paw in the air dismissively and replies, “Don’t panic, you breathed fine there and have continued to do so since you got back, you are fine. It is certainly interesting though.”

“Apparently, I’m just a big bag of weird,” I reply drily.

Winston seems to miss my words completely, as he’s lost in his thoughts. He hums, and says, “Leave it with me, I will try and find some answers for you.”

It’s not until he has disappeared that I realize that when I told the story, I didn’t elaborate on how I killed that creature; I just said I killed it. I didn’t mention the sword or anything. That is a massive oversight on my part, especially since I wanted

to talk to him about it, and if he knew of it. Enchanted objects are so rare that they are usually known and can be traced back to their previous owners. I can ask him when he pops back up again.

If we can find some more information, then we will have a wealth of knowledge on the sword and know how it works, things to avoid, and trigger words—that sort of thing. I glance at my sword, where it is still resting next to Betty, it seems to be behaving for now although I will always be cautious when I leave a room without it now that it has tried to impale me. I have no idea how I knew that it was coming for me and caught it, but I'm hoping that it wasn't a one-off thing and that I will continue to get small blasts of intuition where it is concerned until we can find some solid information on it.

I am half tempted to tell both Betty and the sword to behave while I'm gone, but that seems to be edging slightly more to the really crazy and not just mildly crazy, so I settle instead for giving them a warning look. I admit that is probably just as crazy.

I still need to name the sword, but I kind of want to work with it for a bit, practice with it, and see if a name stands out to me. Chances are that it has a name, and if I can somehow figure out what that name might be, then I imagine that it will make working with the sword a lot easier. Of course, I am assuming that it is meant to be mine. I did find it when I needed it, I can wield it with no problems, I can sort of understand its intention, and it didn't electrocute me when I touched it, so I imagine that all of that means that it is mine.

I shake my head; I don't have the time to think about all of this at the moment. Right now, I need to get that little black card and head down to the front door to meet Raiden. I am aware that I have been up here for a while now, and he is probably wondering where on earth I have got to. As I'm rushing to make sure I have what I need, it occurs to me that Winston didn't respond to my fishing about what Raiden did in order to save me from slipping into the Darkness too soon after already being

there. Either he doesn't know, which I find unlikely, or he just chose not to tell me for whatever reason.

I'm beginning to get a grasp on Winston and his personality, and I am pretty sure that it would be pointless for me to question him about it. I will just have to add it to the list of things that I'm going to let drop for a moment and question at a later date.

I take the stairs quickly, pulling on my leather jacket as I go, and smile at Raiden, who is waiting by the door for me. His worried expression disappears completely as he smiles at me, and my lips automatically lift in response. He has got a gorgeous smile.

He is dressed in dark jeans and a black, tight-fitting t-shirt that leaves just enough to my very vivid imagination, dark brown boots, and has thrown a plaid and a leather jacket similar to mine over the top.

He looks hot, but then again, I pretty much always think that he looks hot.

"Everything okay?" he asks me as I come to stand next to him.

I nod, "Yeah, Winston was in my room."

"Oh?" Raiden questions with his eyebrow raised, "Did he have anything interesting to say or was he only checking in."

"Well, he had no idea that the imp had transported me to a different realm, which I thought was interesting. He showed up to make sure that I was okay after my freak out about the Choosing, but he couldn't really tell me about it, like if it was going to happen or anything," I explain.

Raiden frowns slightly, "Oh that's a shame, I thought that we might be able to find

out where you were.”

I smile, “He knew where I was from the description of the backward knee creature thing.” I say the name really slowly, so I don’t end up messing it up, “He said that it was a place called Luesidious.”

I chose not to tell Raiden that he also said that I shouldn’t have been able to breathe there. I’m sure that he will figure it out at some point, but I would really like to lessen my weird, just a little bit. With that in mind, I keep my mouth shut.

Raiden’s eyebrows draw together, “I have never heard of it. But it gives us something to look into, and maybe we can figure out why the imp sent you there now that we know where it was that he sent you.”

“Yeah, that’s a good idea. He wouldn’t tell me shit, although I will ask again if I see him again,” I say, a bite in my tone. I am still pissed that he sent me to another realm, even more so now that I know that realm could have killed me just by breathing the air if I wasn’t super weird—no wonder the little shit looked as shocked as he did.

“You can try, but imps are notoriously elusive, which is why it’s so strange that he spoke to you in the first place,” Raiden replies.

I wave my hand over myself as I say, “Er, have you met me? Strange is pretty much all I am.”

His eyes follow my hand movement and heat, when they reach my eyes again, he clears his throat and shakes his head, his eyes still alight with stars, “You are so much more than that.”

He doesn’t give me a chance to reply, which is a damn good job because I am pretty sure that all that would come out of my mouth right now is absolute nonsense, and I

would most likely end up embarrassing myself.

“Sorry what?” I ask because apparently, I was focusing too hard on not talking nonsense that I completely missed the fact that he is asking me a question and is now staring at me expectantly.

Neith

He smirks and holds up a set of keys, “I said, are you ready to go? We can talk more when we are in town, but I want to get going in case one of the guys finishes their report. I want you to myself for a bit.”

I try not to show how much his words have affected me, they shouldn’t, but he has said two really sweet things in the space of five minutes, and I’m not used to being on the end of sweet things, so it’s sort of throwing me through a fucking loop.

I chuckle, “Yeah I’m ready to go.” As I follow him out of the front door I add with mock shock, “Hold up, you mean we’re actually going to drive somewhere?”

He chuckles as he leads me around the side of the house that I haven’t seen yet, and I see a truly huge garage, I mean it’s fucking ginormous. I guess it makes sense, there are a lot of them living here, and I know just from how much I have on my card that they have more than enough money to buy a lot of nice cars if that’s their thing, and if you have nice cars then you need somewhere secure to keep them, hence the giant garage.

My eyes widen slightly as I realize that I can buy myself a fucking car. I don’t know much about cars, but I sure as hell appreciate them. Like many people, I have a few that I would love to own. That is something that I really need to think about before I purchase. Raiden then says probably the only words that could stop me from thinking about cars at that moment in time.

“How do you feel about motorbikes?” Raiden looks slightly apprehensive as he leads

the way into the third garage along.

I stare at the beautiful bikes in front of me, “Wow, some of these are really fucking rare. Before you ask, I love bikes. There is something freeing about being on a bike; it feels like fucking flying. There is nothing quite like it, as far as I am concerned. I know enough about them to recognize that some of these are really fucking rare, but that’s about it. I don’t really know much about them mechanically,” I pause, my eyes still running over the bikes, as I correct my previous statement, “Actually, I guess that’s not strictly true. I know enough that I could fix a simple issue. Enough to keep the bike going.” I finally pull my eyes away from the bikes to look at a smiling Raiden, “I’m sorry you asked me a question?”

He chuckles again, “Don’t worry, I think you answered it perfectly.” He gets a contemplative look on his face as he asks, “I’m pretty sure I know the answer to this question from the way that you have been speaking about bikes, but do you ride?”

I grin, “Yes, I ride.”

I’m fucking good too, I think it’s because I have no real fear of dying, so I take risks that I probably shouldn’t. My lack of fear of dying doesn’t come from the fact that when I should die, I go to the Darkness Friend. As bad as it sounds for a long time, it just hasn’t mattered to me either way, living or dying. I should clarify I don’t have a death wish, but I have always been very comfortable with death. For years, I have been aware that I could die at any second, and that could really be it for me.

My life has not been safe or even remotely close to it for a long time, so my options were: I lived in fear, and I let that fear control my actions and my life no matter how long or short it may be, or I embraced it. I chose to embrace it; I acknowledge that I could die at any moment and not come back. It has allowed me not to live my very dangerous life in fear. It has also allowed me to have a certain level of confidence in certain situations and a distinct lack of fear.

I watch as Raiden walks across the garage and types a code into a lock box secured to the wall, he picks out another set of keys, shuts the box, and then turns back around with a smile on his face.

“Do you think you can keep up?” he asks, his eyes flashing with challenge.

My body fizzes with excitement, and I bounce on my toes. I try to reply casually, but I know that my excitement is evident and giving me away. “I think I’ll manage. Unless, of course, you have cheated and given me a bike that isn’t as powerful as yours?”

Raiden shakes his head, his smile widening, “I would never.” I raise my eyebrow, “I may have briefly considered it, but I had a feeling you would kick my ass.”

“Damn straight,” I grin. “Which one do I get to ride?”

“Actually, I should give you a choice. Do you want the Honda Cbr 1000 or one of the Harley’s?”

I can’t believe that he is giving me a choice of which bike I can ride right now, and a choice of those bikes, I mean they are fucking beautiful. I would love to own any of the Harley’s in here, but the Honda, painted in this oil slick kind of paint that changes color if I shift angles when I’m looking at it, has been my dream bike for a long fucking time.

Memories try to push forward of the man who owns one similar but in matte black, one that I used to ride on the back of and take for rides myself. Memories of laughter and fun and a time before he grew too dark. I push it all away, making sure that my expression doesn’t falter in the slightest.

The man I remember no longer exists. It’s as simple as that.

Those memories make me hesitate, but only for a moment. I fucking love this bike, and it is still my dream to own one someday.

“The Honda,” I say, pointing to the purple beauty.

Raiden’s eyebrows rise, clearly surprised at my choice. I’m not sure whether he is surprised that I knew which one the Honda was or just surprised that I wanted to ride it, but his smile quickly covers his surprise.

“It just so happens that I love those bikes so much that I have two,” he points to where a dark emerald green one sits further back in the garage, lost in the sea of other bikes.

My smile widens, “Perfect.”

His smile becomes softer, and he replies, “Yeah.”

He hands me the keys and walks back to the door that we came through, picking up two helmets and giving me one. I raise my eyebrow in question because one of them definitely looks like it's my size, and the guys all have bigger heads than I do. Not in a weird way, they aren't disproportionate or anything. An image of Reed with a giant head flashes across my mind's eye, and I have to try really fucking hard not to laugh because it's fucking hilarious.

Before I can get too carried away with my wayward thoughts, Raiden thankfully answers my silent question.

“I had Doc conjure you a helmet,” he explains.

“Oh, of course. Thank you.” I say as I take the helmet off him and pull it on. I shouldn't be surprised that it fits me exactly, but I am. I don't know how Doc does it.

Well, he uses magic, but that doesn't detract from how amazing it is.

Raiden pulls on his own, and somehow, it makes him look really fucking hot. I don't know how that works, but the helmet, the boots, the whole biker look really turns me on. Fortunately, my mouth is working with my brain instead of against it for a change, and it stays shut and doesn't tell him how much I want to fuck him in this garage. Maybe on one of these bikes. Oh, I do love my imagination. I'm going to have to save that image for later.

He presses a button, opens the garage door, and then gestures toward the helmets. "These are connected, so we can still talk to each other. The way into town is pretty straightforward but a decent ride."

"Good," I reply, my smile huge, although I'm not sure that he can see it.

We waste no more time and get on the bikes. As I turn the key and the bike growls to life beneath me, a shiver of excitement runs through me. It has been far too fucking long since I have had the rumble of a bike beneath me.

I glance over to Raiden, wanting to share the excitement with him, only to find his attention already on me, a look in his eyes that sends an entirely different kind of shiver through me, and my clit pulses in response.

I move the bike slowly to the door and then stop next to him in the doorway.

"We'll take it easy so you can get used to the bike," he says, "if I go too fast and you need me to slow down, let me know."

Now, at this point in time I could tell him just how experienced I am when it comes to bikes, especially this one, but I decide it would be more fun to mess with him a little bit, so I just nod.

“Okay, will do,” I reply as seriously as I can manage.

He seems to be satisfied by my answer, and we slowly pull out of the garage. I let him take the lead because I have no fucking idea where I am going, and it would be weird if I tried to go in front. As we drive past the front of the house, Reed is coming out of the front door, he does a double take when he sees us drive past, and I wave, hoping he can tell that I’m smiling, and I don’t look like I’m constipated or some shit.

Surprise lights up his features before amusement dances in his eyes, he waves back at me, then turns straight back around and heads back into the house, which is weird because I swear that he was walking out of the door when we came around the corner, not heading back inside.

“What was that about?” I ask Raiden through the helmets as we pick up a little bit more speed, and head down the long driveway to the gates that I walked through on the first night.

“Nothing,” Raiden replies, although something in his voice tells me that may not be entirely true.

I let it drop, since I get easily distracted by the giant gates opening to let us through without us stopping. He must have one of those button thingys, that means you can open the gates as you approach, oh, or maybe, there are some kind of chips on the bikes that automatically open them. That would be so cool.

I roll my eyes at my thoughts; I am clearly very easily impressed.

Reed

I can’t help it, I have to tell them now it’s just too damn funny, and my run can wait.

“I thought you were going for a run?” River asks as I walk back into the meeting room where everyone has spread out to write our reports.

I couldn't sit still, I had too much energy running through me, and ever since I let my magic out in the clearing near the portal, I have been finding it more challenging to keep it leashed. I'm still doing it, obviously, but I don't want to. She didn't look at me in fear, she thought I was hot with my wings out. I don't ever want to forget that look of heat and wonder on her face as she stared up at me. I have never wanted to kiss someone more than I wanted to kiss her in that moment, and the only thing that held me back was the fact that she just fucking died and then came back.

I won't forget that either.

“I was,” I reply and then take a seat, “guess which bike he's let her ride?”

Ransom's eyes widen, “No fucking way, the Honda?”

“The green one, right?” Griff asks, when I shake my head and grin, he chuckles.

“Seriously?” Evander asks, “He let her ride his favorite bike, the one that even we aren't allowed to touch?”

I nod, “Yep, and he didn't even seem bothered by it.”

The table is silent for a moment before Doc sits up straighter, his eyes flash gold briefly as he asks, “Wait, she rides?”

His magic has been a lot more reactive than I have ever known it to be since Neith showed up on our doorstep. It's certainly curious, especially since his magic is usually quite difficult to work with. He has way more than he should have, but he usually has to coax it out in order to get it to work. It's apathetic and lazy. It has been

the opposite of that recently. But then again, I can't say much, my magic is behaving out of the norm and so is Raiden's, and River's for that matter. The way that his kitsune behaved with Neith is completely out of character for the usually laid-back shifter.

It's something that I need to keep an eye on, although I have no idea what it could mean.

River groans as he makes the connection too. "Oh fuck, I bet she looks stunning on a bike."

"That's an understatement," I mutter.

Everyone lapses into silence again, although this time, it's for an entirely different reason. I would be willing to bet that Neith on Raiden's bike is playing through their minds.

She didn't just look hot straddling that bike, she looked completely at ease and at home on it. It wouldn't surprise me if Raiden has underestimated what she is capable of, he was driving down the driveway a lot more cautiously than he normally does.

"Damn," Griff says, and I smirk. He continues, with a slight grin of his own, "How weird would it be if I was outside washing one of my cars when they came home?"

I chuckle, and everyone smiles, but I can see that they are genuinely considering the question.

After a beat of silence, Evander says, "I think it would look less weird if we were all out there washing cars."

"I don't think that would be less weird," Ransom points out. He shrugs, "But I really

want to see Neith riding Raiden's bike, so I think we should do it anyway."

"Agreed," the whole table, including myself, reply.

It's a no-brainer, really. I don't think we are even bothered if she does see right through us. Which is really likely because it's winter, and it's still fucking cold outside, so it is even more weird that we will be cleaning our cars out there.

Evander's expression is full of amusement as he replies, "Alright, I guess that's a plan then. Let's get these reports written quickly so we can make sure that we are out there when they get back."

Everyone starts to write again, and the sound of keyboards tapping fills the room. My need for a run has diminished now that I need to get the report finished as quickly as possible, so I don't miss Neith coming back on the bike.

"Wait," River says after a while, breaking the silence in the room and gaining our attention, making us all look at him.

"What?" Ransom questions, his eyebrows rising as he scrubs a hand through his hair.

"Wouldn't it make more sense for us to do something like clear out the garages?" he suggests.

"Well, it would still be weird," Doc replies, "but it would make more sense than cleaning the cars in the middle of fucking winter."

Laughter echoes through the room.

"So, new plan then?" I ask, unable to stop the amusement from leaking into my voice.

“It still doesn’t make much sense, but sure, we’ll clear out the garages instead.” Evander agrees.

“To be honest, they do need doing anyway,” Griff replies, wincing slightly.

“Apart from Raiden’s, he always keeps his spotless,” River adds, pulling a face and looking slightly envious.

“Wait, so our fake task that we were just going to do so that we can see Neith on a bike has turned into an actual task of clearing out our garages?” Doc asks.

“Yeah,” Evander nods with a frown.

River points at Doc, “To be fair, it’s your own fault that you’re involved in the garage clearing out.”

“He’s right,” Griff agrees, “you’ve only just fully moved in, but you’ve had your garage of vehicles and stuff here since we moved in.”

Doc crosses his arms over his chest and smirks, “Hey, you guys offered. Who am I to turn down a super secure garage that is easily accessible to me and big enough for all of my toys.”

“Fair point,” River replies.

“It does mean that you have to help now though,” I grin.

Doc nods, “Yeah, but it will be worth it to see Neith on a bike, Raiden’s bike.”

“Does anyone else find it interesting that Neith has managed to slip past all of Raiden’s defenses in a shorter amount of time than even we were able to do?”

Evander asks, glancing up from his screen once again and looking at all of us.

I shake my head, “If you had asked me on day one, I would have said that I was surprised by how quickly she has managed it but after knowing her for a few days, I am entirely unsurprised, there’s just something about Neith.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” Ransom replies. “I think the surprises and changes are only just beginning when it comes to Neith.”

“Definitely,” Doc agrees, “there is a lot that we don’t know about her and her life, and she reacts as someone would who had been through a significant amount of trauma.”

A rumble builds in my chest. I can’t help it, and I’m not the only one who is making their displeasure at Doc’s words known.

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Reed

I hate that she has been through things that have hurt her and that have affected her enough to give her trauma responses, but there is no denying it. The way that she reacted to the news of the Choosing wasn't because of the Choosing itself, but rather being forced into a situation that she didn't have any control over. We are all aware of that, we all have been through shit which means that we can easily recognize the trauma responses in others.

"At least we know how to help her," River says quietly.

I nod, along with the others, although there is still a tension in the air.

"She's with us now, and she's safe," Griff says firmly, looking around at us all he adds, "We will make fucking sure of it."

"Agreed," we all reply.

His words soothe that swirling pit of unease that was growing in my stomach. She has us now, and there isn't much that we can handle.

I have no doubt that we would all put her before ourselves, I have no idea how she has gotten us all wrapped around her little finger, but there is no fucking denying it. We would fight for her, and beside her.

"Let's get the reports done," Griff says in his gruff manner that leaves no room for arguments.

We all put our heads down and actually start writing again without any more interruptions.

Neith

“There aren’t any more turn offs for a while, we’re staying on this road for a good few miles,” Raiden says through the helmet speaker.

“Okay,” I reply.

He has been taking it really easy, I can understand why. He has no idea how confident I am on a bike or how experienced I am, and even then, some of the most experienced bikers I have known have always been nervous on twisty roads like the ones that we have just driven on. I get it. I’m just over it. It has been far too long since I have been on a bike this fucking nice, and the last thing that I want to do is to take it easy.

“Are you okay?” he asks, sounding slightly concerned, “I’m not going too fast, am I?”

He really is sweet. Bless him.

I have been riding behind him, since I needed to follow him to know where we are going, but he said that we would be on this road for a good few miles. I want to play.

I pull up beside him and wait until he glances over at me before I say, “Catch me if you can.”

I wait just long enough to see his eyes widen in shock before I laugh like the maniac I am and take off at high speed. Raiden’s laughter sounds in my ear as he easily catches up with me. As we take the corners at speeds we probably shouldn’t and start

to overtake each other and really race, I realize that he was holding back a lot, too.

He has managed to overtake me again, and using a move that is particularly risky, and usually used in racing, I undertake him on the corner, my knee coming close to the asphalt.

“Fucking hell,” Raiden curses, although I can hear the smile in his voice.

I pop back up having successfully overtaken him and lift up my middle finger, looking in my mirror to see him throw his head back and start laughing. My smile is huge, but he only lets me enjoy the win for a moment before he speeds past me and sticks his finger up making me laugh.

We play like that for a while, but unfortunately, because we are driving so fast, the turning to the town appears before I am ready to stop playing.

I let him take the lead again as we slow back down since these roads are a lot busier than the one that we have just left.

“Do you want to grab a coffee or head straight to the big mall and get some stuff done?” Raiden asks.

“Erm, mall first and then coffee after? I am really not looking forward to this, so I would rather get it out of the way so I can enjoy the rest of the day with you,” I reply.

“Sounds good,” Raiden replies.

As we drive through the town, I realize that this area is one of the supernatural towns because they clearly outnumber the humans. It isn't a very big town, although it does seem to be equipped with everything that you could possibly want, including some supernatural stores that I desperately want to look in. There's a coffee shop called

Coffee and a Spell, a herbalist store that sells all sorts of interesting bottles of things I have no name for and that are most likely deadly, and a freaking sword shop that looks awesome, although I get the feeling that I probably shouldn't take another sword home with me because my enchanted one seems to be stabby enough as it is, and I have no idea if it is capable of getting jealous.

I have a feeling that it most likely is, so I'm not going to risk it by taking another sword home. The last thing that we need right now is a vengeful enchanted object that can't be good.

I have to admit that I am disappointed when we leave the town with the enchantingly named stores, and turn into a mall that looks like the thousands of others that are spread throughout this country.

As we pull into parking spots and I take my helmet off, Raiden asks, "Why do you look so disappointed?"

"Honestly?" I ask, and he nods, looking curious. "I want to explore the stores that are clearly aimed at supes in the town, and I'm disappointed that we are at the mall that appears to have none of those. It's been ages since I have been able to have a look around a supe owned hypothecary. I could do with picking up a couple of bits since I can't get anything from my house."

Raiden chuckles and gets off his bike, prompting me to do the same.

"You have made it incredibly clear how much you hate shopping, so I thought that we would get it out of the way as quickly as possible. This is the best place to do that," he explains. "We can head into town after, grab a coffee and have a look around if you would like? You can pick up the bits then. Hopefully, you will be able to go back to your house at some point and grab the stuff that you want to move into our place."

Well, I guess that answers the vague question I had about whether I am staying with the guys or getting my own place. I like it. I have been lonely in my little house, as much as I love it.

I nod, “Yeah, that sounds great, actually. I hope so. I don’t have much, but what I do have, I fought fucking hard to get, so I would hate to lose it all. I won’t be selling my house, for a similar reason. I love that little place, even if I never live there again, I can’t part with it.”

“I get that,” Raiden replies, “there is no reason that you would need to sell it. If everything goes to plan, then we could use it as a holiday home or something.”

I chuckle, “That’s sweet, but there is no way that it would fit all of you in it, and the town isn’t exactly supe friendly.”

Raiden frowns, “Yeah, the guys told us. Why were you living there? You obviously don’t have a problem with supernaturals, but you were staying in a predominantly human town.”

“A couple of reasons actually,” I start, wondering just how much to explain, “after Dimitri and everything that went down, I needed a break from supes, and I also didn’t trust that he wouldn’t come after me despite the fact that I was under HID protection. A human town talks when a supe comes to town, I would get a small forewarning. It was a safety precaution. It also kind of called to me? This is going to sound crazy, but you should be getting used to that when it comes to me now.”

He grins, “Now I’m intrigued, go on?”

“Well, I had been desperately looking for somewhere safe to live, I was twenty, been through things that,” I pause, and change the sentence, “been through too much. I just wanted somewhere to rest, to recharge, somewhere that was mine. I was working for

HID but lived on the road, they would call me, and I'd tell them when I could get to the job based on where I was. I stopped in that little town, at Bobby's, actually, and was looking through the paper, and my little house practically jumped off the page and screamed 'mine' at me. One of Bobby's regulars and now a favorite of mine, Pete, saw what I was looking at and asked if I liked it. Being me, I blurted out that it felt like mine; he said he was selling it as he had moved closer to town. I told him I had some money saved but not nearly enough and he ended up getting me a job at Bobby's, and said I could pay him off in instalments. It was a damn miracle. I finished paying him off a few years ago, but I will never forget what he did for me."

"Wow," Raiden says, "that's pretty cool. I would like to meet Pete. It sounds like he was there when you needed him."

"Yeah, he was my favorite regular," I chuckle, feeling a pang of sadness. I won't be working at Bobby's any time soon, or ever. I have no need to now that I am working for SID.

"You will be able to go to see your house. I'll make sure of it, and like I said, there is no need to sell it," Raiden says.

I smile, "Thanks." I change the subject, "Let's get the boring shit over and done with."

Raiden grins and puts his helmet on his bike, making me frown. That doesn't seem safe.

"Don't worry, Ransom has put a charm on them. If anyone tries to take them, they will get a nasty shock," Raiden explains, clearly realizing where my hesitation has come from.

"Oh, awesome," I reply as I put my helmet on my bike. I can't help but pat the tank

of the bike affectionately, “This bike is absolutely amazing.”

“I think so too,” Raiden smiles.

We start to head toward the doors of the mall, and I notice that the closer we get to them the more tense Raiden gets, his smile leaving his face and his shoulders tensing. The man who was just laughing with me as we raced here has completely gone, and I don’t fucking like it. I can’t fix it unless I know what caused the change, though. Something tells me that it isn’t because he hates shopping as much as I do.

I want to get us out of the place that is clearly uncomfortable for Raiden as quickly as possible. I only need a few things to tide me over until I can get some stuff delivered. I spot a store that sells pretty much everything that I need, but it’s further in the mall.

“Come on, I think we need to go this way,” I say, since Raiden has fallen silent and has a scowl on his face.

His eyes dart in my direction, his expression softening slightly and then closing off and becoming hard again as he just nods.

We have been walking for about ten minutes when I realize that everyone is giving Raiden a wide berth and looking at him with fear and judgement. Raiden’s jaw is clenched tight, and that light that was in his eyes has faded completely.

Oh, fuck no, I’m not letting these stupid fucks have that effect on him.

I grab his hand, earning a gasp from a passing woman, and I stick my middle finger up at her because fuck her. The snicker I get from Raiden for my actions is well worth the glare the stupid bitch gives me.

Raiden looks down at me curiously, that amusement still dancing in his eyes.

I squeeze his hand, “Ignore the judgmental fucks. They aren’t worth your time.”

His expression falls, and he says barely above a whisper, “They’re scared of me.”

I shrug, “Let them be scared of you. The people that matter know who you really are; they know what you are really capable of.” I wave my hand around at the idiots, still giving us a wide berth, “These fuckers don’t matter.”

He smiles, although it’s not quite as wide as it was before it’s better than the shut down look that he had moments ago so I’ll take it.

“Thanks, Neith,” he says, squeezing my hand. I love how tiny my hand feels in his.

“Let’s get this boring shit out of the way so we can get back to the fun stuff,” I say as I start dragging him forward, studiously ignoring the shocked looks that are being thrown our way. I knew that reapers had a bad reputation, and that people were wary of them, everyone knows that, but I had no idea that it was this bad. It seems extreme, and I want to do a bit more research into the reason why so that I can understand better, not because I think that they are in any way right. It seems ridiculous to me to judge anyone based on anything other than their individual actions.

“You know people are going to stare just as much, if not more when we’re in town.” Raiden says as we move through the mall and finally get to the doors of the store. “I didn’t think. I just wanted to spend some time with you. I should have just let one of the others take you.”

I smile, “One, that is fucking adorable, people rarely want to spend time with me,” he looks down at me incredulously like he doesn’t believe me and I shrug, “I’m weird, in lots of ways that have made it difficult to have people in my life.”

Understanding fills his expression, but he can clearly tell that I don’t want to go any

further into it, so he asks, “And number two?”

“Number two is that I’m enjoying spending time with you, and I don’t give a shit if loads of people are staring. It doesn’t bother me,” I add. What I don’t tell him is that I’m fine with it unless one of them decides to say something; I get protective over the people I care about. I grab a cart that’s by the door; I don’t plan to get too much, but I hate carrying baskets, so a cart it is.

“If you are sure?” he asks.

“Yep,” I reply with surety, and then, because I want to get him out of his own head, I add with a smirk, “I need to get underwear. I had to go commando.”

“Fuck,” he groans as he drops back slightly, still holding my hand, and his eyes go to my ass.

I burst out laughing, and he smiles, this time it reaches his eyes. Mission accomplished.

He moves so he is walking next to me again, and we make our way through the store until we get to the underwear, I grab a lot. I don’t want to run out again, and I love pretty underwear. I pretty much get every style that you can think of, apart from the thongs that are just string. I find them uncomfortable and would rather go without any underwear, and I don’t get any of the full women’s boxers. I don’t like the feel of them on my legs under clothing; it pretty much becomes the only thing I can think about until I can take them off, so they are a no-go.

I also get some great big comfy underwear because sometimes that’s all I want to wear, and for when Aunt Flo visits.

At one point, I decide to leave the cart and just throw stuff into it instead of trying to

get it through the tiny aisles and risk knocking shit over. Raiden is looking highly amused.

“I’m going to stay with the cart. You have at it,” he says, and I nod, already on a mission.

I meant what I said about wanting to get this done quickly, so it's only a few minutes before we are heading to the main clothing part.

“I only need to grab a few day's outfits, and then we can get out of here,” I say.

“Don’t forget we have the poker game and the trip to the training academy on Monday. I don’t know if you need to get some stuff for those,” Raiden reminds me.

I pause in trying to find my size, “What day is it?”

“Friday,” Raiden replies, with a slight frown as he pulls out his phone and then nods, “yeah, it's Friday, so much has happened, and our sleep schedule has been all over the place, so I wasn’t sure if it was.”

“Me neither, that’s why I asked,” I reply. “That means the poker game is tomorrow.”

I don’t wear anything special to the games, but I do try not to look like I’m going on a job when I go to the bar, so instead of black everything, I tend to mix it up with a blue pair jeans and some nicer boots, although I always make sure I can still kick ass in them because I need to do that more often than not when I’m at Sully’s.

I grab a few pairs of jeans in varying colors. A variety of t-shirts that I like, and a couple of plaids, some nice boots, and a cute jacket. Throwing in a couple of hoodies and some PJs, I look over the very full cart and have a momentary panic about how the fuck I’m going to afford it before I remember the little black card I have that has

more money on it than I have ever seen in one place, well, one legal place.

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Neith

Old habits die hard, and I think it is going to take me a while before I stop worrying about how much things cost and if I have enough money to cover it.

“I’m done,” I announce.

Raiden’s eyebrows rise, “Really? That was really quick. Are you sure that you have everything that you need?”

I nod, “Yeah, I’m pretty sure that I do. I have enough to keep me going for a few days and probably longer since I got a bit carried away. It’s been a long time since I could buy myself new clothes.”

“You deserve to go a little crazy,” Raiden adds. “We could go to a different store. Just to have a look around and see if there is anything there that you would like?”

“I’m really done. I need coffee and food. I will go crazy when I shop online, that’s where I really shine,” I chuckle, steering the cart toward the checkout.

When we get to the till, and it's time to hand my card over, I can’t help but feel like my card is going to bounce. It’s happened to me before, and it’s fucking embarrassing, I hate it. Of course, it doesn’t do that, and I let out a sigh of relief when everything goes through like it should.

Raiden grabs the bags before I can protest, and then immediately takes my hand in his again, making me smile. I like this, I have never really been a hand holding kind of

person, but I could get used to this, it's nice.

"We need to get you a phone," Raiden says as we walk out of the store and glances down at me, "Griff has messaged me four times already, reminding me that I need to make sure that you get one."

I smile, "He does realize that a phone would have been completely useless in the other realm, right?"

Raiden smirks, "Yeah, I'm pretty sure he gets that. He just wants to make sure that you can get hold of us easily if you need to and get hold of anyone else you want to as well, like Sully."

"Yeah, that would be nice." I reply, thinking of a few people that will need to have my new number. "Lead the way and point me in the right direction when we get to the store too. I have had the same phone for years, and that was a second hand one, so I have no idea what I'm looking for now."

"I can help with that. It's probably best if we just get you the same model as ours. Are you okay with that?"

I nod, "Yep. I need a case though, I drop my phone a lot."

I don't tell him that I happen to throw my phone in my sleep sometimes as well. I need the sturdiest case that I get.

When we get to the shop, the sales guy goes into a full sales pitch and starts throwing all of this information at me in such quick succession that my brain immediately goes, 'yeah we're not interested' and turns itself off. I have no idea what he is saying. Fortunately for me, Raiden is still paying attention, and asking the right questions, and I'm soon walking out with my brand new phone, all set up and in the strongest

case that they have.

I squeeze Raiden's hand, and he looks down at me curiously.

"Thank you for taking over. He threw so much information at me that, if I'm being really honest with myself, I'm just not interested in it, and my brain switched off," I explain.

"That's okay. River does exactly the same thing, except he just walks off mid-conversation, and we end up having to apologize for him," Raiden explains.

I burst out laughing as I picture River doing it, "Oh my god, that's fucking brilliant, maybe I should just start doing that. It would certainly save the awkwardness that always ensues after I have tuned out of a conversation and then don't know how to answer whatever question they have asked."

Raiden shrugs, "It works for River."

He has almost completely relaxed now and is back to being how he was at home, he seems to be easily ignoring the people staring around us. Which makes it even more noticeable when he suddenly stiffens, that emotionless mask slamming back down over his features.

"What's wrong?" I ask immediately.

He gestures to a dark-haired woman, powerful but not nearly as powerful as he is, or any of the guys, actually. She has a superior look on her face as she grins maliciously at Raiden, and I instantly don't like the bitch.

"Someone from my past, my childhood. Where I come from, the weak are perceived as less, well we are perceived as worthless and treated as such. She is someone who

took great pleasure in that, the males I could make back off simply because I was always a better fighter than they were. She knew I wouldn't hit her, though, no matter what she did to me."

"Cunt," I hiss, and a surprised chuckle breaks free of his mask. Before he comments, I add, "You're stronger than she is, though, a lot fucking stronger."

He glances sharply at me, "You can tell that?" I nod, and he shakes his head, the cunt is nearly at us, "It's safer for them to think that I am weaker."

I nod, but don't reply since she is now in hearing distance. Message received and understood, don't let on to the woman that he is stronger than he seems.

"Okay," I reply simply.

His voice lowers, "Let me handle this, she's difficult. She is also a higher rank than I am, so I have to show her a certain level of respect."

I nod again. I'm going to stay out of this interaction and let him handle it since that's what he wants me to do. I don't like the sound of him having no choice but to show her respect, but I don't know enough about reaper culture, so I'm just going to do as he asked and keep my mouth shut.

Hopefully, I mean, my mouth doesn't always follow my good intentions.

"We could just walk away?"

"Too late," he mutters under his breath.

"Aw, it looks the weak little bitch boy has a girlfriend," she sneers at me, "and a human one at that. I guess that makes sense."

My eyebrows rise, and I bite my tongue really fucking hard. She is coming in hot, that's for damn sure.

"Melody," Raiden replies, his voice completely devoid of any sort of emotion.

"Bitch boy, how is it being at the bottom of the food chain? Ignored and cast aside by your own family," she starts. Raiden ignores her, his face blank. His lack of interaction doesn't seem to bother her as she just carries on. "I bet you didn't even know that your sister had a baby, did you?"

I glance up at his face just in time to see the hurt flash through his eyes before he buries it again.

"No, I didn't," Raiden replies when it becomes clear that she wants an answer. She grins victoriously, but Raiden adds before she can say anything else, "If you'll excuse us, we need to get going."

We start to move past her, but she steps in our path again, her attention on me, "I should warn you, he's weak. Not much power at all, it's a wonder that he managed to get a job for SID. You would be better off with someone else."

I really have to bite my tongue and have to remind myself that Raiden wanted to handle it. Thankfully, before my brain decides to tell her exactly what I think of her, she obviously decides that I'm not worth her time and turns her attention back to Raiden. He stares over the top of her head.

As she lays into him, I get angrier and angrier by the second. Who the fuck does she think she is, speaking to Raiden like that just because he's supposedly weaker than she is?

She's a fucking bully.

“Fucking pathetic excuse for reaper, your family were right to cast you out,” she says.

I am barely holding onto my anger, and then she pushes him.

My fist is flying before I have even consciously thought about doing it. Her nose crunches under my fist, and blood splatters my knuckles as she screams like a banshee, her hands going to clutch her very broken nose. The fact that she doesn't immediately try to fight me says a lot about how strong, or rather weak, she really is.

“You crazy fucking bitch!” she yells, and my smile widens and my fist clenches.

“I would be careful what you say about Raiden. He may have to give you some respect because of your power level, but I don't, and I'll enjoy beating that smug smile off your face. Touch him again and find out just how much damage a human can cause,” my smile widens so that it's less of a pleasant look and definitely too wide to be anything other than threatening.

I take a step toward her again, but I find myself suddenly airborne and thrown over Raiden's shoulder. He salutes the still bawling bitch and then turns around, strolling in the direction of the exit. I prop myself up so that I can see the positively dark glare that she is giving us, and then smile, finger waving at her before I flip her off instead, and her glare gets darker.

I don't bother fighting Raiden to put me down, one because I don't want to hurt him, and two because I'm pretty sure if he did put me down, I would finish what I started. I'm still pissed at the way she treated him.

We are nearly to where we put the bikes, at least I think we are, when Raiden finally speaks.

“Do you want me to put you down?” he asks.

I shake my head, “Nah, I’m good. I’m enjoying the view.”

His ass looks fucking awesome from this angle.

He chuckles, “Me too.”

Well, okay then.

After a moment, I say, “I’m sorry. I know you wanted me to stay out of it.”

I feel him shrug underneath me, which is a weird feeling, “Don’t be, that was fucking awesome!”

“Oh, thank fuck, I thought you might be mad,” I pause and then add with fire in my tone, “I meant it, if she touches you again, I’ll take her fucking hands.”

Raiden stills and shifts me. All thoughts flee my brain entirely as he lets me slowly slide down his body, feeling all the hard ridges that his clothes are hiding. His eyes catch mine as soon as I’m upright. The fire in them doing things to my body that I wasn’t even aware a single look could do to a body.

My feet touch the floor, but I don’t move back, I don’t want to, and he makes no move to let go of me. My eyes are still connected to his, and I see indecision flash through them as he lifts his hand to my cheek and gently rubs his thumb along my cheekbone. He leans down, bringing his lips close to mine. I close the distance; I have never been good at being patient.

He groans quietly as our lips touch, and he pulls me in closer. The world disappears. All that exists is him and me, and it’s a feeling that I have never experienced before but one that completely consumes me. I feel his magic start to grow before he clamps down it and reigns it back. I get why, we are in public, and he’s supposed to not be as

strong as he is. Also, I am pretty much human, and who the fuck knows if I can handle all the magic that will get thrown at me if Raiden lets it free.

I get all of that, still, I wish that he would let loose some of that control. The longer we kiss the more sure I am that he is stronger than I thought he was. The piece of his magic that I somehow have surges forward, and I swear I can see it glow briefly as an image of some sort of string or something flashes through my mind. It only lasts for a brief moment before I get consumed by Raiden's kiss and all thoughts flee my mind.

Raiden's tongue licks the seam of my lips, and I open for him, our tongues moving together passionately. Eventually, the kiss slows, and he pulls back, looking down at me with surprise.

Yeah, I didn't expect that to happen either.

Whoops?

Actually, no, I'm not going to say whoops because that implies that I think that it was a mistake, and while it could potentially cause an issue if I viewed it as more than a simple kiss, I don't regret it. He's a damn good kisser.

"I guess that means I didn't disturb you talking about cutting her hands off then?" I ask because I don't know how to react to this situation.

He chuckles and shakes his head, "No, it was hot."

Stepping back, I chuckle, "It's really good that you think that because violence is sort of my go-to."

He grins, but his face quickly becomes serious again, "Really, Neith, thank you for standing up for me like that. Her words don't hurt me, not anymore. Although I will

admit learning that Morgan had her baby stings a bit, we were close until she mated, and it wasn't just my parents telling her that I was too weak. It was her husband, too."

"Dicks, the lot of them," I growl, "not your sister."

He shrugs as we walk the last few feet to the bikes, and he starts to put the stuff from my bags into the saddlebags on his bike and then mutters something that I can't hear, and a big backpack appears that he can fit the rest of it in. I stare in awed wonder at him, since it hadn't even occurred to me how we were going to get the stuff home, so it takes me a moment to remember what we were talking about when he continues the conversation.

"My parents, yes, I won't get into it but their treatment of me was unnecessary to say the least. My sister's husband though, he wasn't cruel, it's just how it is done with reapers. I wasn't strong enough for the family name so it was stripped from me, and Mor should technically have stopped talking to me, but she has never done what she was told."

I frown, "But you aren't as weak as they think, are you?"

He glances around and shakes his head, "No, but that's a story for another time."

His tone leaves no room for arguments, and it's clear that is all he is willing to say on the matter.

"Okay," I reply as I grab my helmet and swing my leg over my bike. "Can we still go into town, or do you want to head straight back?"

He once again looks surprised, as I change the subject without pushing him for more information, but replies with a smile, "We can head into town, grab a coffee and walk around for a bit."

I grin, and put my helmet on, waiting for him to do the same and then follow him out of the lot.

I want to learn more about reapers and the way that they work. Unfortunately, I know that I won't be able to find any of the information that I want in books because reapers are an incredibly secretive species. It's understandable after the way that they have been treated.

This town is pretty small and cute, so we are only back on the bikes for a few minutes before we're parking up again, right outside of the coffee shop. Inhaling deeply as soon as I take my helmet off, the strong smell of coffee and sweet-smelling pastries immediately hits my nose, and my stomach growls loudly.

Raiden chuckles, "Come on, let's get something to stop your stomach shouting at us."

"That's probably a smart idea. It's only going to get louder," I agree. "Oh, I need to get a cinnamon bun for Wallace."

He frowns as he opens the door to the coffee shop, gestures for me to go in first, and asks, as he follows me inside, "The moose?"

I nod, "Yeah, I asked Winston how to thank him, and he said that Wallace liked cinnamon buns."

"Huh, you know, I don't think I ever would have guessed that," Raiden replies.

He is looking slightly uneasy again, since everyone is looking at us, but nowhere near as uneasy as he looked when we arrived at the mall. I nudge him with my shoulder and smile up at him.

"So, what do you want? My treat," I ask, then add because I can see that he's going

to, “don’t even try to argue with me.”

“I would never,” he replies seriously as his lips twitch, fighting back a smile. “I’ll have a caramel latte, please, the big one, and a blueberry muffin.”

I nod and turn to the woman behind the counter, I like her immediately simply because she is smiling at both of us and not judging Raiden. She’s a supe. I can feel it, and judging by her pointed ears which are just visible through the curly waves of her bubblegum pink and soft green hair, I think she is a fae. That’s a pretty broad classification; there are high fae, pixies, trolls, sprites, and so many more that all technically fall under that category.

“Hey, I’m Neera. What can I get you?” she asks with a big smile.

I quickly reel off both of our orders, and make sure that I get two cinnamon buns for Wallace, he’s a big moose and I figure one isn’t really going to do much. She nods, getting on with the orders quickly. She’s bubbly, and friendly but I sense more behind her smile and that immediately intrigues me.

“So, you’re new in town,” she starts, as she gets the things that we have asked for. When I look at her in surprise, she laughs, the sound like tinkling bells as she adds, “It’s a really small town, Raiden I recognize, as well as all of his friends, but you’re new.”

I smile, “Yeah, it was kind of an accident, really.”

Understanding flashes across her expression, “Same.”

Neith

“Since you’re new in town, and I’m assuming that you don’t know many people yet, we should get a drink sometime. As friends, I’m not asking you out. I mean, you’re hot, but I don’t swing that way,” she groans as her ramblings cut off and actually face-palms herself. Glancing up at me with a wince, she adds under her breath. “This is why I can’t make friends.” Speaking at a normal volume, she says, “Never mind.”

I burst out laughing, “I would love to, anyone who can ramble like that is good with me. I should warn you though I’m likely to ramble more than you.”

Her face lights up as she looks surprised, “Really? Even though I was just super weird?”

I nod, “Yeah. I am way weirder than you.”

“She is,” Raiden teases with a smirk, and I smack his stomach with the back of my hand, making him laugh.

Neera laughs again, “Thank fuck. Here’s my number, give me a text, and we will sort something out. There is only one bar in town, but it’s good.”

I take the piece of paper off her, and slip it into my jeans pocket, “Sounds good. My schedule is pretty hectic and I’m not just saying that.”

Her eyebrows draw in, “You a part of SID too?”

I nod, “Yeah, I’m on their team.” I reply, pointing at a still smiling Raiden. “It’s a new development.”

“That’s awesome,” she replies.

We chat a bit more while she makes our drinks, and by the time she is done and we are walking out, I know that we will probably make great friends. So long as we can both find the time to meet up. It turns out that the coffee shop isn’t her only job. She has a couple of others in town as well. I get the feeling that she likes to keep busy. My intuition was tingling the longer that we were talking, although I don’t know enough about her yet to understand why.

“Where to now?” I ask as I sip my drink.

“You said that you wanted to check out the apothecary?” Raiden asks.

I nod, “Yes, please. All of my usual stuff is obviously at my house.”

He looks confused as he asks, “What sort of things did you use?”

“I learned some stuff from Sully, and it was mostly simple stuff, things to help with pain and to help me heal quicker. Oh, and I make his awesome mix that I like to burn, that smells spectacular.”

“You needed the pain relief a lot?” he asks.

I nod, “Yeah. HID didn’t like to provide me with medical assistance if it wasn’t life or death, and even then, they would bitch about it. It was just less of a hassle for me to take care of it at home. Plus, Sully knew some really good recipes.”

“How come you only stuck three bandaids over the slice from the shifter then?”

Raiden asks although it's clear from the tension in his body that he doesn't like that I needed the pain relief so much.

"I ran out of the things I needed to make the healing one, and I knew that it wasn't going to be a problem anyway, not like it is for normal humans. I was tired," I shrug, "bandaids seemed like a good idea at the time."

He frowns, "You make it sound like you had been bitten by a shifter before."

I make the split-second decision, to be honest with him instead of brushing it off like I usually would. "I ran with Dimitri. It wasn't safe. Shit happens."

"Fuck, yeah. I keep forgetting that you were with him," Raiden replies. His eyes dart to mine, "Shit, does that mean that he knows that the bites don't affect you? That he knows you are something more?"

"That is a two-pronged question, and both have different answers. Does he know that shifter bites don't affect me? I'm not sure; there were times when he thought I might have been bitten, and I played it off as a close call, but I don't know if he was suspicious or not. If he was though he never said anything. So, although he may be suspicious that something wasn't quite right, he doesn't have any proof of that being the case. The second question is even more tricky to answer. He doesn't know that I'm something more because I didn't know. I have also shared more with you guys about how weird I am than I did him."

"He never saw anything?" Raiden asks, being careful about how he phrases it since we are out in public and should probably be careful about what we say. I am assuming that he is referring to me dying.

I shake my head, "No."

I don't elaborate because that would mean admitting that I had died before, and then we would have to get into how many times, and well, that whole conversation would be complicated and horrifying. I also don't want to lie outright and say that when I died in front of them, that was the first time. I'm actually surprised that none of them have asked me that yet, although a lot has happened since then, so I think that's helped to distract them from asking.

I can see the wheels in Raiden's head begin to start turning as his brain tries to connect the dots to ask the question that I don't want to answer. Fortunately for me, the apothecary that I wanted to go into is just up ahead, and I grab his hand again, pulling him toward it.

"You're going to have to tell me if there is a scent that you guys don't like," I start, trying to distract him and then effectively distracting myself when I add, "Shit, you will have to tell if I pick up anything that is deadly to you guys. It would be just my luck if I accidentally killed one of you."

Raiden chuckles as he focuses on my random questions and not our previous conversation.

"Don't worry, I won't let you pick up anything that could harm us, although it's really unlikely that they sell anything here that could do that. I have no idea what scents the guys like. Maybe you should just get the stuff that you usually get, and I'm sure they will let you know if they don't like something." He smiles, "To be honest, it's River that you need to worry about with scents, his nose is incredibly sensitive, even when he's in human form."

I nod as I grab an adorable wicker basket from by the door, "Okay, I can just get him to sniff everything before I use it."

"That's probably a good idea," Raiden replies, watching curiously as I start to put

things in my basket.

Sully always drilled into me the importance of knowing what it is that I am using and not using anything that's not on the list that he has given me. So, even though there are all of these bottles and boxes of interesting looking things, I only get what I know. It's a good job that I now have my black card because this is going to cost a lot of money. I usually stick to buying an ingredient when I get a paycheck or getting samples when I can, which helps to keep the cost down. This is probably the first chance I have had to buy everything at once, and just like with the clothes, it is a nice feeling.

I don't know how long I spend looking around the store, but I get completely absorbed in it, and Raiden must sense this because he just follows me around quietly and watches what I pick up. After a while, I realize that his silence might have to do with the supe behind the checkout, who is watching him with distrust in his eyes. Unfortunately, I don't notice the way that he is looking at Raiden until I'm at the checkout, otherwise I would have insisted that we leave.

He quickly rings up everything, clearly wanting to get rid of us as quickly as possible.

"Well, that wasn't nearly as pleasant as the coffee shop and Neera," I say as we step outside.

"Sorry," Raiden replies, drinking the last of his coffee and then throwing it in the trash can.

"Don't be, it's not your fault," I reply, doing the same thing. "Do you want to just head home?"

Raiden shakes his head, "I'm good. Do you want to look at another store?"

“Well, if you are sure, I would love to check out the blacksmith. I saw it when we came through town on the way to the mall, and I wasn’t going to risk looking at all of the pretty swords in case my one got jealous, but I think that may be a bit ridiculous,” I explain as we start to walk down the street to the blacksmith’s store.

Both of Raiden’s eyebrows rise as he shrugs, “I don’t know, your sword does seem like it has a pretty big personality. I think if it knew that you were here, then it would definitely be jealous, but as you said, there is no way for it to know. Enchanted swords are powerful and amazing, but they are not able to know what you are doing at all times. They are also supposed to work with you. It’s not like one of you is in charge, and the other one has to listen. It’s supposed to be a partnership when it comes to enchanted weapons.”

I frown, “I bet that not all of the supernaturals that have had the privilege of an enchanted object have stuck to that hierarchy.”

“No, many of them assume that they should be the master of the weapon and then wonder why their weapon doesn’t come when it’s called or why it abandons them completely.”

“They can do that?” I ask. “Just decide that they don’t like you anymore and leave?”

Raiden frowns, “In most situations, it’s not that they don’t like you anymore, it’s that they have fulfilled their purpose with you, and it’s time to move on. I don’t know how they know that they are no longer needed, and I don’t know how they make sure that they are found by the right person. No one does, and there has been extensive research on the subject.”

“They don’t always find the right person,” I comment.

“How do you know that?”

“I’m just assuming because there is a really big market for stealing enchanted objects. All enchanted objects, not just weapons. Dimitri had a team that would go and locate the objects and then sell them in the Obsidian market,” I explain.

The Obsidian market is the equivalent of the human black market except for a few significant differences. The human black market is pretty much just a name, a place where unsavory humans can sell services and stolen goods mostly, but usually business is conducted online.

The supernatural Obsidian market is an actual market. It moves location every day, which obviously can only be achieved with magic, and it sells all things supernatural. Ingredients for spells and potions, and by that, I mean body parts of supernatural creatures and things that are really fucking difficult to get hold of. They also sell stolen goods and services. I have been to the market a couple of times, and the place disgusts and fascinates me all at the same time.

It's a really dangerous place to be, especially for a human, as humans are needed for some spells, well parts of humans at least. The only reason that I was safe was because of Dimitri, he was, is, feared amongst most supernaturals including the ones at the Obsidian market. They either feared him or wanted to get into his good books so that he would do business with them.

“Yeah, that’s true. I think it has become a lot harder for the enchanted objects to find the next person that they should be with, but I do like to think that even if they do end up getting sold at the Obsidian market, they still manage to find their person,” Raiden replies, pulling me out of my thoughts.

“Yeah, maybe,” I agree. It’s a nice thought.

Magic is obviously heavily involved with the enchanted objects, and I am sure that it has a way to make sure that the object, whether it’s a weapon or something else, still

ends up in the right place.

Our conversation is put on hold as the blacksmith comes into view, and I grin with excitement.

“Hang on a moment,” Raiden says, and then adds with a chuckle, “sorry, I know that you are excited to get in, but I think one of the guys has an order here. I can check on the progress of it since we are here anyway, but I need to check which one of the guys had the order first.”

I nod, and try to wait patiently as Raiden taps away on his phone, thankfully he gets a response straight away, at least I assume he does because his phone makes a noise.

“Can we go in now?” I ask. I’m aware I’m being impatient, but honestly, bladed weapons are my absolute favorite thing, well, one of my favorite things.

Raiden chuckles and pulls open the door for me, “Yeah, we can go in. It was Evander who had a sword commissioned with him. He lost the last one on our last job, but he said that it won’t be ready for a while yet.”

I nod. I don’t bother to reply because I’m too excited, and I just want to get inside and see how good he really is. I need some swords made now that I’m an agent at SID. Guns have a tendency to go a bit wrong around some supernaturals, so they are good in some instances, like, for example, shooting a raging hybrid intent on eating you. In other situations, guns won’t work, and I will need a sword. If in doubt, chop the head off is usually my motto.

I could buy one readymade, but I would much rather have one made specifically for me. I know I have my enchanted sword, but I need more than the one sword, and my sword will just have to get over it if it does get jealous.

“Hey man,” the guy who is obviously the blacksmith says.

I smile, I like this guy simply because he’s talking to Raiden like they are friends and not like he is terrified of him.

“Hey, we just came to have a look around,” Raiden says and then gestures to me, “this is Neith, she’s a new member of our team. She is going to need a sword. Neith this is Lewis.”

Lewis smiles at me, “Nice to meet you, Neith. I’m sorry, but I’m actually just about to close, I’ve got an appointment to get to.”

Disappointment thrums through me momentarily before I smile, “No worries, we can come back another day. It’s going to take me a while to design and choose what kind of blade I would like. We probably don’t have enough time before we have to get back to the house anyway.”

Lewis’s eyes light up, “I like you. Raiden and the guys know when I’m usually open, get one of them to message me when you are free next, and I will make sure that you have the store to yourself.”

“Seriously?” I ask, my eyes widening as I start to bounce on my toes with excitement.

Lewis chuckles, “Absolutely.”

“Thanks, man,” Raiden says as we walk back out of the door, and Lewis follows behind us to lock up.

“No problem,” he replies.

Before I can tell him my thanks as well, he waves and rushes down the street in the

opposite direction to the one that we came from.

Raiden glances down at me apologetically. “Sorry Neith. I know how badly you wanted to go and check the swords out.”

I grin, “You’re kidding right?” I ask, and then carry on excitedly, “I get to have the store all to myself while I design my weapons with someone who clearly knows what they are doing. That’s fucking awesome.”

Raiden’s smile is big as he adds, “Yeah, Lewis is a fucking master at what he does. I honestly don’t know why he chose to settle in our small town, but I am incredibly grateful that he did. I honestly wouldn’t go to anyone else to get my blades made. He makes custom bullets as well, specifically designed to take down all sorts of creatures, and not just to kill but to stun as well. He’s a fucking genius.”

My eyes widen, “Wow, that is so fucking cool. I hope that we manage to find the time to come back soon.”

Raiden frowns, “Hopefully we will. But with the way that things are going at the moment, I’m not going to make any promises.”

“Fair enough,” I reply with a smile.

“Do you want to walk around town for a bit longer and have a look at some more stores?” Raiden asks me.

I shake my head, “It looks like it’s going to rain, and I have had enough exploring for one day. Do you want to head back?”

Raiden nods, “Yeah, that sounds good to me.”

We get back to the bikes, and Raiden takes the bag with Wallace's cinnamon buns in and opens his jacket, zipping it back up. I'm guessing that there is no more room in the bags since they are full of my clothes, and he's got no more of the magical appearing from thin air ones. They will be squished, but I highly doubt that Wallace will mind too much. If he does, I will eat them.

Once we are out of the town and back on the road that we raced on before, we both automatically start to race—trying to beat each other and playing more dangerously than when we were on the way here. I guess Raiden has a similar view of death as me. Actually, scratch that. He's a supe, so he could probably come flying off at these speeds and survive with barely a scratch.

I really appreciate the fact that he isn't treating me like I'm breakable, and trying to stop me from flying on the bike, it would really piss me off he tried.

It doesn't take as long as I would like it to, and we are soon pulling up the long driveway that leads to the guy's house and through the gates.

"What are they doing?" I ask as we come around the corner and I see all of the guys pulling stuff out of, what I am just realizing are their individual garages, and putting it all outside of them. Although all of their attention is now on us as we drive up.

"They're cleaning their garages," Raiden replies, sounding slightly confused as we come to a stop. Suddenly, he bursts out laughing, and not just a small chuckle, nope, he is full-on belly laughing.

I take my helmet off, and wave at the guys before I turn to look back at the still laughing Raiden, "What's so funny?"

"Hey!" River exclaims, rushing up to me and picking me straight up off the bike, giving me a giant hug that I practically melt into.

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Neith

I guess he is a touchy-feely kind of guy, and that makes sense. Shifters tend to be, and I am not complaining in the slightest. His hugs are like magic.

When he finally puts me down, I turn to the rest of the guys with a smile. It's nice to be greeted when I get home, it's usually just Betty and she's choosy with her replies. Okay, she doesn't reply.

"Did you have a good time?" Ransom asks with a smile.

I nod, "Yeah, it was great. Well, people are dicks when it comes to reapers."

Griff frowns, "Yeah, they can be pretty fucking prejudiced."

"Oh, and then," I start, getting fired up again, which makes all of their eyebrows rise, and Raiden chuckles as he leans against his bike, his arms crossed over his chest, and just watches us. "Some bitch decided she could push Raiden after speaking shit to him for ages."

"Fuck," Van growls, looking at Raiden, "you ran into Melody?"

"Oh, so she's known for touching you like that?" I ask Raiden, "I should have taken her fucking hands when I had the chance."

"Wait, what?" Doc asks, looking really confused.

“You’re okay?” Reed checks with Raiden.

Raiden nods with a smile, “Neith broke her nose, made her wail like a little bitch, it was glorious.”

“If you hadn’t carried me off, then I would have finished it,” I reply with a huff.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” Doc mutters.

River is bouncing around and starts firing off questions which I’m pretty sure I only follow because I do the same thing, “You fucking legend. What was it like? Did she cry? I don’t hit women, but she was a godawful piece of fucking work. I wish I could have seen it. Do you think that they will let me have the security footage? Wait, you broke her nose?”

I grin as I answer his questions, the others looking at me expectantly and clearly wanting to know the answers too, “It was fucking awesome, but I only got to hit her once. Yes, she cried. She is fucking vile, and if I see her again, I will finish what I started. I don’t know if they will let you have the security footage, but you will have to ask them. Yes, I broke her nose.”

“I can’t believe that you followed all of that,” Ransom chuckles.

“Whoa, hold up, you broke her nose?” Griff asks, repeating River’s question.

I throw my hands up, being dramatic because that’s what I’m good at, “Yes. I did. Why is that such a big deal? I have broken plenty of noses and other bones before. One bitches nose is nothing to me.”

“It’s a big deal because reapers are particularly strong creatures and don’t break easily,” Reed says.

“In other words, you shouldn’t have been able to break her nose.” Van clarifies for me.

“Oh,” I reply, and then add, “Well, if it helps, she isn’t very strong. She isn’t really even a blip on the radar compared to Raiden’s power, or any of yours actually.”

Raiden’s eyebrows climb, “Wait, really? I know you said when we were there that she’s not as strong as me, but she’s really that weak?”

I nod and then frown, “Well, she felt weak to me. I don’t have any other reapers to compare it to, but she was also weaker than Neera.”

“Neera?” Reed asks.

“Do you mean the woman who works in the coffee shop in town?” Doc asks.

I nod, “Yeah, we’re going out for drinks soon, but Melody wasn’t as strong as Neera was.”

“I’ve met Neera, she’s strong but unless Neith is sensing something that none of us can, then she shouldn’t be stronger than Melody,” Ransom adds.

“But Neith is sensing something that the rest of us aren’t because she’s picked up that Melody isn’t actually that strong,” River points out.

I interrupt, “Guys, I could be wrong. I might just be making shit up.”

“Are you?” Reed asks bluntly.

I shake my head, “Well, no, but . . .”

Evander interrupts, “This must be a part of your supernatural side pushing its way forward. Sully said that there would be new developments now, that’s probably one of them, being able to sense how strong someone really is.”

He seems so happy that he’s right that I really hate to burst his bubble, but in this instance, I think it’s necessary.

I shake my head, “I would agree with you, but I have always been able to tell how strong someone is. It isn’t a recent development, and I suppose the only reason that I know that I’m right is because I already knew the strengths of the people that I was guessing about, so who’s to say that my knowledge wasn’t influencing my feelings?”

Raiden nods, “That’s a very good point, and I would agree, but you know how strong we are, and we have very strong enchantments on us. You know River has nine tails . . .”

I interrupt, “I can see them.”

Raiden smirks, “Fair enough. But you know when all of our magic is starting to play up, which is probably part of the sensing how strong a supe is thing. You also shouldn’t be able to feel very much at all from me, and yet you can tell that I’m stronger than Melody.”

“Huh,” I mutter. “I guess you may have a point. When you put it like that, it makes sense, I suppose.”

“I have no idea what supernatural has that gift,” Raiden frowns, “but I can see what I can find out.”

“Could you do it when we were kids?” Van asks.

I wrinkle my nose, I already know what he is going to ask me, but answer his question anyway, “Yeah.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” he asks, a hint of hurt in his voice.

“You really wanted me to be a supe and go to the academy with you. I knew that if I told you that I could tell that you were stronger than your dad and told you the difference between the others at the compound too, then it would have gotten your hopes up, and I knew that I wasn’t going to get in and that I wasn’t a supe,” I explain honestly.

“Oh,” Van replies, a deep frown on his face.

“What I don’t understand is that if she’s got such a low power signature, then how is she the tier that she is?” Raiden says, seemingly randomly.

“Cheating,” I say when no one else seems to have the answer.

“How?” Reed asks.

“How am I supposed to know?” I reply with a smirk. “It just seems like the most likely reason behind her tier, whatever that is, and her low power level.”

“It doesn’t really matter because I won’t do anything about it. That would bring me under scrutiny, and I don’t want that.” Raiden says with a shrug.

A look is shared between them all and I know that there is more to that than there seems to be.

Something more important than asking about it crosses my mind though, and I say, “Fair enough, whatever floats your boat and all that, but it might still be a good idea

to look into it just enough to have some solid information. You never know when you may need the information that she has cheated her way into her position of power. Knowledge is a powerful bargaining tool and is almost more valuable than money and jewels.”

Raiden stares at me, his eyes on fire, and nods just once, almost like he doesn’t trust himself to speak. The others grin.

“I think you broke him,” River chuckles.

“You just quoted something that he is always telling us,” Doc tells me, sounding highly amused.

“Well good. Then he will realize just how important what I said is,” I reply, because I don’t really know what else I can say in response to that.

Our kiss flashes through my mind, and I smirk. I push it away before Doc picks up on my desire or River smells it. I have no idea if he is capable of that, but if his nose is as good as Raiden was saying, then he most likely can.

“Did you get a phone?” Griff asks, completely changing the subject again.

I nod and grin proudly as I fish around in my pockets and hold my phone up triumphantly. I get a bit too excited, and I end up fumbling the phone before I watch it crash to the floor, bouncing once and then landing screen down. I bend down, quickly scooping it up and cautiously turning it over. When I realize that the screen is unbroken, I smile triumphantly.

“It’s fine,” I announce, and turn to Raiden who is holding back his laughter, “that’s why I needed the extra strong case.”

“She’s as bad as River,” Griff groans.

“No one could be that bad,” Ransom disagrees and then chuckles, “that was pretty close, though.”

“What are you guys doing anyway?” I ask, changing the subject and hopefully moving us on from discussing my clumsy ways.

“Cleaning out the garages,” Evander explains.

“Which would be a first,” Raiden mutters.

I shrug, “Fair enough. I can honestly say I have never had the desire to clean out a garage before. While you guys are busy doing that, I’m going to go and find Wallace.”

Raiden stands up and unzips his jacket, holding out the cinnamon buns for me. I smile gratefully as I take them off him.

“Yeah, we should probably start clearing up anyway. We need to talk about HID and what is going on there. We also need to call Ty for an update and to see if he has any more information on the clearing,” Evander says, and then adds, “Whose Wallace?”

“The moose, remember?” Raiden asks.

Van shakes his head, “Nope, I remember the moose, but I don’t remember him being called Wallace. Why do you need to see him?”

“I need to thank him,” I reply. Turning to Raiden, I add, “I’ll come back and grab my stuff after I’m done talking to him.”

“Don’t worry about it. I will transport it all to your room,” Doc interrupts whatever Raiden is about to reply, and his magic builds for a moment before settling again.

“Thank you,” I smile, “I could get used to magic. It comes in handy for a lot of stuff.”

“You’re going to have to,” Ransom grins, “you’re stuck with us now.”

“Doesn’t sound too bad to me,” I reply. “Are you guys still going to be out here when I’m done, or should I meet you inside?”

“We will be inside. We are nearly done anyway, and we need to go over what I mentioned before,” Evander replies.

I nod and then head around to the front of the house. The whole property is surrounded on all sides by woodland, so technically, I could have called Wallace near the garages, but for some reason, I prefer to go around the front of the house and call him where I did the very first time. Probably because they all came when I called from there, and despite the fact that it worked that time, I am worried that it won’t work this time. If I end up looking like an idiot shouting off into the woods, then at least if I am around the front of the house, the guys aren’t within earshot or sight.

I would rather only embarrass myself in front of the forest creatures and not in front of the very delicious men that I live with.

I get closer to the tree line than I did the first time that I spoke to Wallace and the other spirit guides. Although they didn’t say anything that time, only Wallace did.

I feel just as ridiculous as I did the first time when I say, “Wallace, I was wondering if I could talk to you? I have no idea what I’m doing right now or how to summon you guys, and I feel a little ridiculous.”

Okay, so more words came out of my mouth than I intended to then, I meant to ask if he could come see me, I didn't mean to add all of that extra stuff too.

Wallace steps out of the woods before I can stress about it too much. I am reasonably sure that he doesn't live there, despite the fact that he is a moose. I'm not sure where he lives, but I assume that he only appears to me in this form since he is a spirit guide. So maybe he lives on one of the levels in the spirit realm and then just shows up here when he's doing spirit guide shit. That's definitely something that I need to ask Winston about, if I remember, which, let's face it, is pretty unlikely.

"Is everything okay?" Wallace asks me.

I realize that I have sort of just been standing and staring at him while my brain goes off a tangent and I wince.

"Sorry, I got distracted by my own brain then," I explain and then hold up the paper bag, "I got you some cinnamon buns to say thank you for helping Raiden to help me, although I still don't know what he did."

Wallace's eyes fill with amusement, "That is up to him to choose to tell you or not. I appreciate the cinnamon buns, although you didn't need to do anything to thank me."

I smile, "I know. Winston said the same thing, but I still wanted to show you that I appreciated it. However, it has just occurred to me that I should probably get something for Winston, too. He seems like the type to get jealous."

"He is," Wallace replies, "but I'm sure he doesn't mind in this instance."

"Hmm, okay. Well, I'll think of something." I reply, and then ask something that I have been curious about, "Where are the other spirit guides? You all helped me to get here, I kind of thought that you would all stick around? Or is it just Winston and you?"

Not that I mind.”

I force myself to stop talking before I start rambling.

“They are around, and they will be there when you need them. You may not see them for a long time. Spirit guides only come to you at the right time, Winston and I seem to be more connected to you at this point in your journey.”

“That sort of answers my question but also doesn’t at the same time,” I reply, frowning slightly.

Somehow, Wallace manages to shrug his moose shoulders, and honestly, it looks so weird that I am almost disturbed by the view.

“I need to go,” Wallace says.

I nod and hold out the paper bag with the cinnamon buns again, just as I begin to wonder how he is going to carry them, he takes the bag in his mouth, does a moosey grin, and then disappears from sight in a flash of magic.

Well, I guess that’s that then. All of the questions that I wanted to ask either him or Winston come flooding back, and I silently curse that I forgot to ask them when he was here. Something tells me that if I called him back now to ask the questions, he won’t come, so I don’t bother.

The temperature is starting to drop now that it is late afternoon, even though the sun is still up and will be for another couple of hours. Pulling my jacket tighter around me, I start to turn around so I can head inside the house and warm up.

A sound from the woods stops me, I pause trying to work out what it is when I hear it again. It sounds like a cry, a human cry. Now, I’m not new, I know that certain

animals can make sounds that resemble human crying, a mountain lion for example, but I don't think we are in the right area for it to be a mountain lion or any of the other creatures that I know make those sounds.

I can't just leave it. What if it is someone in danger? Or even one of the imps? They sound like humans, and one of them could be hurt or something. They are little shits for sending me on a task for a reason that they still haven't shared with me, but that doesn't mean that they deserve to die.

With that thought, my mind is made up, and I turn back to face the woods and walk forward, pushing past the underbrush and ducking under branches as I follow the sound deeper into the woods. I don't recognize anything around me, this isn't the way that I came when I went for a walk a few days ago, the day before yesterday? I don't know. Time has gotten all mixed up since I have been sleeping for whole days and nights at a time. However long it has been, this isn't the same trail that I took when I ran into the imps. In fact, this isn't a trail at all. There is no path here.

I briefly consider calling the guys and waiting for them to catch up so that we can investigate it together, but the cries become shriller, and I decide that I don't have enough time to waste. I pick up the pace, my feet crunching against the leaves still scattered on the floor, and I try not trip over any roots that they could be obscuring, I've done that too many times to count.

I'm not exactly graceful.

If I go down now, I will be absolutely no help to whatever it is that I am hearing, so I'm trying to be extra careful and hoping that my clumsy curse doesn't take over.

Neith

Finally, I break through the trees and find myself at the edge of a giant lake. I mean, it is absolutely fucking huge, and I honestly had no idea that the guys had this much land, but it must be theirs because I haven't crossed any boundaries, and I would know if I had because I would feel the buzz of magic when I crossed through Ransom's wards.

The shoreline isn't that far away from the trees, and I step out onto the rocky beach littered with driftwood and carefully pick my way toward the dark blue water. Even from this far away, I can tell that it is absolutely fucking freezing, hypothermia freezing. I'm guessing that this is where Evander comes to restore his magic and practice. The cold water doesn't affect him as it would me; he's a siren, so he is made for all water conditions and adapts within moments depending on what the environment requires, it's really fucking cool.

Sirens like to live out of the water mostly, although they do spend a large amount of time swimming and learning in water and if they are away from a water source for too long then it can start to cause them issues. Fortunately, they are all very good at using the moisture in the air if they really need to.

The cry turns into a shrill scream as I reach the edge of the water, and a shiver of warning runs down my spine. I look around me, trying to locate where the sound is coming from, and then frown as I look at the lake.

That can't be right.

How is the scream coming from the water? You need air to scream, and you can't inhale underwater, not without drowning.

I don't know what comes over me, but I bend down, my fingers reaching for the icy water.

As soon as my fingers touch the water, weeds wrap around my wrists and pull me in. Quickly dragging me from the shallows to the deeper water. I barely have time to take a breath before I'm pulled under the water. The murky depths swirl around me, the cold threatening to freeze my limbs as my hair obscures my vision and wraps around me.

No, not hair, weeds and vines wrap around me from all directions, as they pull me deeper into the dark depths of the lake.

That's when I see them, eyes, glowing red eyes. Once I have spotted one set, I see more, dozens of red eyes glowing at me from the depths. Eyes set in horse-like faces, except these horses have razor-sharp teeth. They have two strong front legs like horses, but rather than having back legs, they have a long and incredibly strong tail that helps to propel them through the water and that they also use for fighting. They aren't the traditional horse colors, but instead, they are a mix of muted greens and blues, varying shades but all very dull in color. They also possess a certain amount of magic.

Fuck.

Kelpies, they are fucking kelpies and that means these weeds aren't naturally occurring, it's them and their magic. It also means that they lured me here, and I was the stupid idiot that I should have known better.

I am also reasonably sure that kelpies like to drown and eat people.

Fuck.

I know that one of the worst things that I can do in this situation is panic, but that's pretty much the only option I have as they swirl around me. I'm surrounded on all sides, and they are snapping their wickedly sharp teeth in my direction, clearly enjoying the terror that they are causing in me. I struggle against the tightening vines, clawing at them and trying to get them to loosen, but getting nowhere as every vine I break just gets replaced with another one.

Just as my panic reaches its height, a familiar weight hits my palm, and I grip the hilt of my sword tightly. I have no idea how it's here, but I'm not going to question it.

Don't like a gift horse in the mouth and all that. I could smack myself for that ridiculously bad pun but I kind of need to focus on fighting for my life.

I slash and slice at the vines and the kelpies that start to come for me in earnest now that I have the means to protect myself. I finally escape all of the vines, and they stop being replaced, as the kelpies instead focus on trying to take bites out of me with their wickedly sharp teeth. I manage to catch a few of them with my sword, but it's really fucking difficult to fight underwater. I'm moving slower, but they aren't.

My breath is running out, and I need to escape. I can't just stay floating here and fighting. I guess that my sword can somehow understand what I want, even though I'm not saying anything out loud, because it lets off a sudden pulse of magic, lighting up at the same time. I have no idea what it does, but the kelpies are suddenly nowhere to be found, and I realize that the murky water was being created by them, and the water is actually pretty fucking clear.

I start to swim for the surface when something catches my eye on the bottom of the floor. A kelpie is thrashing around, making an awful, pain filled noise that I can somehow hear even though we are under the water. I quickly realize that its tail is

caught between two rocks.

Don't do it, I say to myself and then roll my eyes as I turn around, and instead of heading for the surface, I head deeper underwater. My lungs are burning as I swim toward one of the creatures who just tried to drown and eat me.

I can't believe that I am fucking doing this.

The other kelpies could come back at any moment, and I have no idea if my sword can let off another magical blast like that again. Both of those are really good reasons to leave the dark blue kelpie to its fate, and yet, I still swim toward it.

It sees me approaching and starts to thrash more, clearly thinking that I'm about to hurt it. I can't talk to it to reassure it that I'm only trying to help because we are underwater, and talking doesn't work for humans or whatever the fuck I am underwater. I also realize that I'm going to have to set it free and swim like hell, hoping that it's still too injured to chase after me and eat me.

I really shouldn't be fucking doing this.

It's too late now.

I start to pull at the rocks keeping it pinned to the floor, and then give up and use my sword to leverage them out of the way. All the while, the kelpie is twisting and turning, snapping at me, and trying to eat me. It should be obvious to the kelpie now that I'm trying to help it, but obviously, that doesn't matter to it at all, and as I change my angle so that I can move the rock squashing its tail, I inadvertently put myself too close to its snapping jaws, and I feel it clamp down on my arm.

Pain sears through me, and I have to clamp my mouth closed tightly as I fight the urge to yell out in pain. The jolt helped to dislodge the rock and move it away from

its tail, and the surprise of being freed made the creature let go of my arm.

I don't hang around. I push myself off the bed of the lake, ignoring the stinging pain in my arm as I swim as fast as I can to the surface. My lungs are burning like fire as my head finally breaks the surface of the water and I take a deep breath, finally able to fill my lungs with much needed oxygen. I don't have time to relax though, I'm sure that kelpie will be coming after me as soon as it's gotten over its shock of being freed. With this in mind, I swim, my sword making it slower than I need it to be, but I refuse to drop it.

Again, it somehow hears me and disappears from my grip, and I momentarily panic until I feel its weight settle on my back.

That's fucking handy. With my hand now free, I put all of my exhausted effort into heading to the shore, which I can see, which means they didn't pull me in as far as it felt. I am very aware that I am bleeding and that my blood is no doubt attracting the kelpies, and I'm like a beacon screaming eat me right now. There is fuck all I can do about it. The only thing that I can do right now to get out of this situation is to swim and get to the fucking shore.

The closer I get to the shore, the more certain I feel that I'm going to be dragged back any second, like they are just toying with me by making me think that I have managed to escape them, when really, they are right behind me. I swim harder, and finally I feel the rocky ground beneath my feet, and I push up, wading through the last of the water until finally I'm free and on the rocky beach. I just need to get away from the water. I don't know much about kelpies, but one thing that I do know is that they can't go too far from their water source, so if I can get far enough away from the lake, then I will be safe.

In theory.

I start to run, my goal the tree line, but before I have gotten even a meter from the edge of the water, I feel something wrap around my foot and I hit the ground hard. Blood splatters the rocks from my arm, and pain spears through me from the bite on my forearm all the way up to my shoulder. I have no time to worry about it though, as I grit my teeth against the pain and grip tightly onto some big rocks that are buried in the beach.

The vines pull me, and my fingers start to lose grip on the rocks, any minute now they are going to give way and I'm going to be pulled back into the depths of the water. I doubt that I will be lucky enough to escape from the kelpie's a second time. I instinctively know that if I go back into that water, then I will not be coming out again.

In a snap decision, I let go of the rocks, the only thing stopping the kelpies from ending me, and I reach for the sword on my back. The blood from my arm drips through my fingers and covers the hilt. The sword warms in my grip, taking some of the pain from my arm just like it did for my shoulder. I am really starting to like this sword. I swing, slicing the vines that are holding one of my ankles, and then scramble to my feet, turning to face the creatures pulling themselves out of the water.

As soon as they get their front feet on land, magic engulfs their tails, and they get back legs, making them look much more like horses. You know, except for the razor-sharp teeth, murderous tendencies, and weeds for manes and tails. I briefly glance at the trees behind me but dismiss the idea of making a break for it. With their vines they are more likely to trip me up and if I go down then I am at a serious disadvantage, especially since I'm getting tired.

Stay and fight it is.

They charge me, giant beasts with thundering hooves, and vicious snarls, and I second guess my decision not to run before. I start slashing with my sword, making

them bleed black sludge-like blood and causing them to make the most horrifying sound. It's a cross between a screech and a cry, and it's not a sound that I am likely to forget any time soon. I realize too late that they are surrounding me, cutting off my exit to the woods and herding me back to the water. They know that their biggest advantage is the water.

I double my attack, my adrenaline pumping through me and pushing back my fear. If I allow the fear to come forward, it could cause me to make a life-ending mistake.

I'm slicing, ducking, and darting around in the small space that is left for me in the center of these terrifying creatures. I'm drawing blood and avoiding the vines and their teeth, but I don't know how long I can keep it up for, I am absolutely exhausted. From being injured, from swimming in all of my clothes, and from already fighting the fuckers off once. I can feel my energy waning, and that heightens my panic.

Shit.

I start to slow, and as they all move closer pushing in on me from all sides, I think that I am done for until there is a loud roar of sorts. It's not quite a roar in the traditional sense, but it's animalistic and mad as hell, so a roar is pretty much the only way that I know how to describe the sound. A dark blue kelpie charges through the ones surrounding me, it's bigger than the others which I didn't think was possible.

Great, this one doesn't want to share and wants to eat me all by itself, fantastic.

Raising my sword and preparing to attack, a zing of intuition zips down my spine and I watch more closely what the kelpie is doing. It's moving around me in a tight circle, biting and snapping at any of the kelpies that are trying to bite me, and it's forcing them to back up. He is so close to me that I could reach out and touch his slick-looking side, but as I raise my hand, I realize what a stupid fucking idea that would be, and I snap my hand back, rolling my eyes at myself.

It's nice to know that even in this situation, where I'm most likely going to die, my own stupidity can still astound me.

The kelpie is protecting me, although to what end remains to be seen. Is he protecting me because he wants to eat me, or is protecting me so that I can escape?

I really struggle to believe that he is protecting me so that I can escape. In all of the lore that I have actually read about kelpies, which admittedly isn't a lot, they never ever spare a victim. I know this, and yet even as he starts to push them all back to the water and a gap to the woods opens up, I can't seem to make my feet move. They stay rooted to the spot as I watch him force every single last one of the kelpies surrounding me back into the water.

When it turns to look back at me, I realize that it looks familiar. It takes me a moment, and I'm going to attribute my slow brain to the cold, pain, and exhaustion from fighting for my life, but eventually, it clicks.

He's the kelpie that I rescued.

My shoulders tense as he slowly moves back up the beach to me, I could run. I probably should run, but for some unknown reason I stay exactly where I am. It stops an arm's length away from me and just stares. When I just stare back at him, he surprises me when he rolls his eyes and huffs like he's exasperated with me. I can't help the smile that crosses my features. Who knew kelpies could be sassy? Before I can react, he moves even closer and nudges the hand not holding my sword. I tense, thinking he's about to take a bite out of me when I realize that he's behaving like a dog would when they want pets.

Surely not?

Surely this giant, and I do mean giant, my head comes to not even halfway up his

side. Surely, he isn't asking to be stroked?

Honestly, this whole interaction is weird, and the chance to pet a kelpie and not get eaten is something that I simply can't pass up, as stupid as that may be. I'm most likely about to lose a fucking hand.

Hopefully, Doc can grow it back.

I slowly turn my hand and using the tiniest movements, I gently stroke his soft nose. He jumps at first, as if he's unsure of the touch, and to be honest that would make a lot of sense. These creatures don't get stroked with hands, and if they haven't lured unsuspecting supes and humans to their doom then they are being hunted by them, and so a soft gentle touch is most likely something that they have never experienced.

Slowly, I run my hand up and down his nose, and the tension in his body drains before he leans his head into my shoulder heavily, and I end up stroking the sides of his neck as I desperately try to stay upright.

I laugh quietly, "Oh, so you like cuddles, huh? That's okay. I can give cuddles."

He snorts in response, his head still pressed against my shoulder, and I realize that he has at least a small level of understanding. He knows what I am saying, and that means he is a hell of a lot more intelligent than all the books that I have read have made them seem to be. I am quickly coming to realize that all of the books that the humans have, at least, do not have the correct information in them.

After a moment of more cuddles, I add, "Thank you for saving me; I am sure that they would have eaten me and enjoyed it."

The chuffing sound he makes is almost like a laugh and I'm assuming that means that I was right.

“I knew it. Do you have a name? If we are going to be friends now, I need to know what to call you. I’m not sure you want me to pick out a name myself,” I ask.

Neith

To be honest, even if he did have a name, I have no idea how he would tell me because he can't speak, and although he has some level of understanding, I doubt he could mime it for me or some shit. I try not to laugh at the image that thought invokes in my mind. The last thing I want to do right now is offend him because he thinks I'm laughing at him when actually I'm just laughing at my overactive imagination.

I'm pondering how I am going to figure out his name when we can't effectively communicate when a name blazes to life in my mind's eye. I haven't stopped stroking him, and he's not looking at me like he has said something, in fact his eyes are shut as his chest rumbles in what I'm hoping is a scary ass purr, and not an 'I'm about to eat you' noise. It's come from nowhere, and I frown. I suppose I don't have anything to lose by using it, unless of course it's a slur of some kind in his language or a command to kill.

Sometimes, my imagination really needs to shut up.

I decided to risk it, and still stroking his nose I ask, "I know this is pretty crazy," he opens one eye and looks at me like he's saying no shit, I smirk but continue, "I don't suppose your name is, Mael?"

He jolts slightly, and then neighs in a happy way, and stomps his massive front feet, it doesn't seem like he's doing it in an aggressive way, he actually looks more like an excitable puppy. A giant, deadly, bitey puppy.

Just to clarify though, I ask, "Is that a yes?"

He stops hopping around and nods, chuffing happily as he comes back for more pets. I have just reached up to stroke his neck, and when his head snaps up, he looks toward the woods behind me. He lets out a terrifying roar that has the hair on the back of my neck, hell my whole body stand up on end. Using his head, he lifts me and sends me flying through the air until I land with a thump on his back. I grip his mane so that I don't fall off, and realize that it's not slimy like I thought it would be, it's actually really soft and I get distracted running my hands through it before Mael growls again, and I remember that there is something going on.

"If it's one of those damn imps you can pretend that you're going to eat them until they answer some questions I have," I say, and Mael chuffs in what I'm assuming is agreement.

I am so fucking high up, it's a damn good thing that I'm not afraid of heights, although I have no idea how I'm going to get down again. That's not really the issue that I should be focusing on right now.

I tense as I start to hear the noise that obviously alerted Mael to the approaching whatever it is. The guys suddenly burst from the forest, and all of them freeze as their eyes land on the kelpie, their expressions fierce and looking hot as hell. Damn, they all look like warriors, swords raised, magic at the ready, and there is just something that is extremely attractive about it.

"Is that a fucking kelpie?" Ransom asks.

"Yep," I reply, grinning happily. I watch as all of their eyes snap up to meet mine, their mouths dropping open in shock.

"Neith?" River questions.

"Get the fuck down from there. Do you realize what that is?" Griff asks as he takes a

step forward as if he's going to come and get me.

Mael growls again, and they tense. Griff stops his forward movement. Smart man.

I lean forward slightly so I can stroke his neck, "It's okay, they are friends, not foe, I promise. You can stand down."

The effect my words have on him is immediate and switches from deadly killing creature to cute deadly creature who just wants pets.

"What the fuck is happening?" Evander asks.

"Erm Neith?" Doc questions but pauses before he says anything else because Mael snorts the second I stop petting him.

"Yes, Doc?" I reply with a grin, thoroughly enjoying how shocked they all are.

Doc clears his throat, "Do you maybe want to explain what is going on right now?"

I chuckle, "Sure. So, after I spoke to Wallace, I heard what sounded like something crying, so I checked it out. The kelpies lured me here and tried to drown and eat me, like they do. My sword appeared, while I was under the water fighting them off, which was fucking awesome by the way. The sword appearing, not me fighting them off. It let off this blast of magic, I guess it was, and they all went away, but I noticed one trapped, and he sounded like he was in pain, and I couldn't just leave him, so I helped him. Then I swam to the shore, the kelpies followed, and I got up onto the beach and they surrounded me, then just as I was running out of steam, Mael came to save me, and now we are friends. He likes cuddles."

I smile and continue to stroke Mael's neck as we both watch the guy's expressions cycle through a range of different emotions, before all of them settle on disbelief

apart from River who just looks really excited.

“Can I stroke him? I have never seen a kelpie this close,” River asks.

Reed crosses his arms over his chest, “No one has. The only way you see a kelpie this close is if it’s about to eat you.”

“I am not even sure how the fuck you have managed to tame a fucking kelpie,” Ransom mutters incredulously.

“I have never read or heard about a kelpie allowing anyone near it, let alone stroke it or sit on its back,” Raiden adds, the wheels in his head turning and I know that as soon as we get back to the house he’s going to be doing some research to see if this is an isolated event or not.

“Why did you get on its back anyway?” Doc asks.

I shrug, “I didn’t. He heard you guys approaching and, I think, decided that I was safer up here than I was down there because he sort of used his nose and actually, now that I’m thinking about it, must have used some sort of magic as well because he flipped me, so I landed on his back.”

River slowly approaches Mael, having gotten fed up with waiting for me to tell him that he could stroke the kelpie or not.

“So, he’s protective of you as well?” Griff asks. He adds, “I know that he growled at us, but moving you out of harm’s way is actively protecting you.”

“It’s definitely unusual,” Raiden adds. “River, be careful. Just because he is letting Neith interact with him doesn’t mean that he will be willing to let you do the same.”

River nods, and then does something that makes me like him even more, he asks Mael's permission.

"Can I please stroke you?" he asks, holding his hand up but making no move to get any closer to him.

Mael moves closer and nuzzles his hand.

"He likes cuddles," I say.

"I can't believe what is happening right now," Evander says. "Although, I shouldn't be surprised, you always did have a way with supernatural creatures. Nothing quite as deadly as this though."

"This is awesome," River mutters. He steps back and inclines his head, "Thank you."

"Wait, you said Mael?" Reed asks, "He told you his name?"

I shake my head, "I don't know how to answer that question. I mean, he didn't use words, and I don't think he intended to tell me. I asked him, and he is intelligent enough to answer yes or no questions to an extent, but after I asked him his name, it sort of blazed through my mind. I asked him and he got really excited, so I don't think he shared it with me. I don't know how I knew it."

"It must have something to do with your magic," Evander suggests.

"It's an odd way for magic to manifest itself," Doc comments.

I raise my eyebrow and smirk, "Thanks for that. A woman always likes to be referred to as odd."

“I didn’t mean that you were odd,” Doc replies with a smirk.

“Wait, what did you say his name was again?” Raiden asks.

“Mael,” I reply.

The adrenaline from this whole situation, the fight or flight, the making friends with a very deadly creature, all of that adrenaline is starting to wear off, and I am beginning to feel the fact that I am still soaking wet, and it’s still winter. I’m fucking cold, and my arm hurts like a bitch. The voices have been a lot easier to ignore recently since there haven’t been that many instances where I have been left alone with my thoughts. They are muttering now though, and I frown. It sounds like the same echo of a word, over and over again. I can’t make it out though, I never fucking can.

I focus harder.

I don’t think I have ever heard them behave like this, usually it sounds like so many voices all talking over the top of each other, and leaving me no way to hear a single word, but right now, they are all almost chanting the same word, over and over again. I can’t help but think that it’s because it is important.

I feel my eyebrows draw together; it’s right fucking there. I can almost hear it.

“I fucking knew I recognized it,” Raiden exclaims.

The voices slip away, becoming indistinct once again. I sigh but let it go. It has always been the same my whole life, I think I’m getting close to hearing them and then they slip away. The only exception has been when I heard Griff say run and then when I heard something when the guy touched me inappropriately in the bar.

“What?” Doc asks Raiden, “We’re going to need a little bit more information if we

are going to understand what you are talking about.”

“Mael,” Raiden says, and I grin as Mael tilts his head to the side as he looks at Raiden, “his name means chief, right?”

Mael snorts, standing proudly and inclining his head.

“I’m going to assume that’s a yes,” Reed mutters.

River chuckles, and we all look at him questioningly.

“I just think it’s funny that out of all the kelpies that Neith could have decided to help, it just happened to be their leader, who she has clearly gained the trust and loyalty of already, which most likely means that the rest of the herd will follow his lead,” River explains.

I shake my head, “I don’t think so, he had to force the others back into the water so that they would stop trying to eat me and they definitely wanted to eat me.”

“That doesn’t mean that they won’t give you their loyalty,” Raiden says and then adds, “kelpies get into a kind of feeding frenzy that is difficult to come out of even if they want to. There is a really good chance that when they have calmed down, and you next meet them that, they are as friendly as Mael is, or at least tolerant of you.”

“Oh, well, that would be kind of cool,” I reply.

I shiver, the wind cutting through my wet clothes, as the tiredness of the last hours events settle in fully and I slump slightly on Mael’s back, he must sense the change in me somehow because he turns his head and glances back at me looking worried.

“Alright, Neith, I think we need to get you back to the house and warmed up. I’m

worried about how much you are shivering,” Doc says.

His words have them all looking at me more closely and frowning.

“Warm sounds really good right now,” I admit. I look at the distance to the floor from where I’m sitting and add, “I’m not sure if I’m capable of launching myself off of Mael right now and landing on my feet and not my ass.”

As soon as I have finished the sentence, Mael ducks his front legs lowering himself so that I can slide off his back easily.

“Wow,” Ransom mutters.

Patting Mael on the neck, I say, “Thank you, friend. I need to head back to the house and get warm. I will come back and see you again soon though if that’s okay?”

Mael nods and then butts his head against my shoulder, asking for pets again. I happily give them and then watch in awe as he gallops back to the water, arching high in the air as he jumps and shifts back to his full kelpie form before he disappears underneath the water of the lake.

“So fucking cool,” I mutter. As I’m watching him, I realize that my sword has completely disappeared and I’m guessing that it has gone back to my room. I have no idea how it works, but I am incredibly glad that it turned up when it did. There is absolutely no doubt in my mind that it saved my life. Finally, turning around, I look at the guys and shrug, “So, that happened.”

Evander shakes his head as he takes off his jacket and walks toward me, draping it over my shoulders and wrapping an arm around me to keep me warm.

“Let’s get you home, Nene,” he says.

I don't argue as we start to walk away from the lake and back through the woods.

"Hey Griff," I start, and he turns to look at me, raising his eyebrow curiously, "I need a new phone."

There is a moment of silence before everyone bursts out laughing, and Griff's lips twitch into a smirk.

"I take it back. You are worse than River. At least he manages to keep his phone for longer than an afternoon," Griff teases.

I grin, "Yeah, to be honest, that's a new record for me. They usually last a lot longer, but then again, kelpies haven't attempted to drown me before. Which by the way, it would have been nice to know that you had them on the property. There is a chance that I may not have tried to follow the noise if I had known that there was a possibility that it was kelpies."

"We would have told you if we knew," Doc says.

My eyebrows raise, "What? How could you not know that there were kelpies in the lake? It's not like they keep to themselves and don't get hungry. How are they feeding themselves, by the way? There can't be a lot of foot traffic out here and lost hikers since this whole place is yours."

The guys share a look.

"Neith, none of us knew that lake existed. In fact, we all know for a fact that it wasn't there," River says.

"We know this property like the back of our hands, and we would have known if there was a lake here, especially one this close to the property. There is one a few

miles out,” Ransom explains.

“I didn’t even know this was here, and water is kind of my thing,” Van adds, looking down at me.

I frown, “That’s really weird.”

“Yeah, it is,” Reed agrees.

“I will put some more wards up, and scan the property for any anomalies, it seems that Neith’s arrival has triggered some changes. First, the imps acting up, and now we have an extra lake and kelpies,” Ransom adds.

“Surely they can’t just appear out of nowhere though?” I ask.

Raiden shrugs as he answers my question, “Magic is involved. It doesn’t really play by any of the normal rules.”

“Fair point,” I reply, moving my arm to wrap the jacket tighter around myself. The movement reminds me of the wound on my arm, and I add, “Oh, I’m bleeding too.”

“That was probably something that you should have mentioned sooner,” River mutters. “I thought I smelt something, but it’s all mixed up with the scent of the kelpie and the river water, and then Van’s scent too.”

“Sorry, I had forgotten about it until I moved my arm just then,” I reply.

“As you don’t seem to be in a massive amount of pain, I think the priority should be getting you warm, I don’t like how much that you are shivering,” Doc says.

“I am good with that,” I reply as the house finally comes into view. I had no idea that

I walked that far. It certainly didn't feel like the lake was that far away from the house, but if magic is involved, then that pretty much means that anything I consider normal doesn't apply.

As soon as we get to the front I rush inside and head up the stairs needing a hot shower and some of my new warm pjs.

"We'll meet you in the front room," Ransom yells up the stairs behind me.

"Okay," I call back.

I'm grateful that although I am tired, and hurt, I'm okay. I'm standing and I'm not dead or nearly dead, that makes a change from the incidents that have happened recently. It's bad that this is my benchmark for a successful encounter these days.

I speed through the shower as quickly as I can while still making sure that I wash off all the gross lake water and the dried blood from the bite. The second that the water hits the bite, I have to clench my teeth against the pain. In retrospect, it might have been better if I had Doc heal me before the shower.

I'm here now though, so I push through the pain and soon enough I'm in my comfy new Pjs with fluffy socks and everything. I didn't even get blood on them when I put them on, which is in part due to the fact that the bite wound has already mostly stopped bleeding. Just in case though, I grab a small hand towel from the bathroom and wrap it around my arm. After all the effort that it took not to get blood on my pyjamas, I will be really fucking pissed if I have to change them because I have got blood on them walking down the stairs.

Shivers are still making my body shake, and I reluctantly leave my room and my nice, warm bed behind as I head back down the stairs to the guys. When I get down there, I head for the first person I see and plop myself down on their lap.

Neith

Glancing up at a slightly shocked-looking Ransom, I say, “I’m sorry. I’m really fucking cold still, and I read somewhere that body heat is supposed to help. I can sit on someone else’s lap if you want me to, though. I probably shouldn’t have just sat down on your lap like that without asking first.”

Ransom’s eyes sparkle as he wraps his arms around me and pulls me closer, “You’re good, Neith, don’t worry.”

I smile as I practically melt back into him. The magic that I am just starting to recognize as his, builds in the air and the thick dark blue blanket appears, covering me and adding to the warmth, as I feel my shivers slow down.

“Feel better?” Ransom asks, his mouth near my ear and the proximity sending shivers of an entirely different kind down my spine.

I feel fucking tiny sitting on his lap and completely surrounded by him, and quite honestly, there is no place that I would rather be right now. Thankfully, he mistakes my shiver for being cold still and pulls me impossibly closer. I’m good with that.

“Yes, thank you,” I reply.

Doc smiles as he moves over to sit beside us on the couch. “I know you are nice and comfy, but can I see where you’re bleeding? I am going to assume that it’s your arm because you came in with a towel wrapped around it.”

I nod as I reluctantly unbury it from the covers and hold it out to Doc, “Yeah. I got bitten by Mael when I tried to rescue him. I think he thought that I was trying to hurt him more.”

Doc’s eyes widen, “He bit you.”

I nod as I get the feeling that he is about to tell me I’ve done something weird again. “What?”

“You should be dead,” Raiden explains.

I roll my eyes, “Of course I should.”

“Kelpie bites are venomous, and they kill immediately,” Evander adds. “That’s why they are so feared.”

“That makes sense,” I reply. “They are pretty fucking terrifying without that though, I really did think that I was a goner. Again.” I hold up my arm so that Doc can unwrap the towel and then add, “So, that means that shifter bites and kelpie bites don’t affect me, neat.”

Vampire bites don’t either, but I don’t particularly want to get into that story right now, so I leave that out.

“Huh,” Doc mutters as he studies the wound on my arm.

“Uh oh,” River says, probably rightly predicting that there is something wrong.

“What’s wrong?” Reed practically demands, a note of worry in his voice.

“Nothing, actually,” Doc replies, and I raise my eyebrow at him in disbelief. He

smirks, “Seriously, it looks like the wound has started to heal.”

I pull my arm out of his gentle grip so I can get a better look at the wound and then poke it with my finger, “Would you look at that? You’re right. It’s not nearly as bad as it was.”

“Your supernatural healing must have kicked in,” Griff says.

“That would be really cool,” I admit. “It would also be something a bit more tangible to prove that I am a supe. So far, it’s been a lot of maybes, and that’s not really confirming anything for me.”

“That’s understandable,” Raiden replies.

“Do you still want me to heal it?” Doc asks.

I nod, “Yes, please. It may be healing by itself quicker than I am used to wounds healing, but it is still healing really slowly, and it hurts.”

He nods, and I hold out my arm. He heals it within moments.

“I checked for any signs of infection while I healed your arm, and there wasn’t any but let me know if you start to feel weird, or experience any pain in the area even though it’s healed,” Doc says.

I nod, “Yeah, I will. Thanks, Doc.”

My stomach growls, and I pull a face, apparently, I am hungry. It’s hardly surprising since night has now fallen, so it’s near dinner time. Oh, and I fought for my life, and had a massive adrenaline rush that tends to make me really hungry.

“We have ordered food,” River grins. “We got lots of variety and thought we could set up everything on the table and just share.”

“Sounds good to me,” I reply, as I snuggle closer to Ransom now that I’m not having my arm healed. I feel a lot warmer, but I’m still chilly, and Ransom is definitely helping to warm me up.

“He could totally warm you up in other ways too,” my inner voice suggests.

I choose to ignore her like I usually do.

“Did you manage to give Wallace the cinnamon buns?” Reed asks me.

I nod and repeat what I told them earlier, “Yep, I gave them to him before I heard the noise and followed it to the kelpies.”

“Did he like them?” River asks.

I nod, “Yeah, he seemed to. He took them off me and then just disappeared instead of walking into the forest all mysteriously like he usually does,” I smile. Turning to look at Evander I change the subject, “You wanted to talk about HID and stuff?”

“That can wait,” Van replies. “You’ve just had a near-death experience.”

I shrug, “I’m good. Honestly, it apparently happens a lot now. We haven’t got anything else to do right now while we wait for the food, so we may as well start to talk about it at least. If the food arrives before the conversation is over, then you should know that I will be tuning out for the rest of it in favor of the food.”

“Fair enough,” Griff replies, trying and failing to hide his smile.

“Are you sure?” Van double checks. I nod, and his demeanor changes as he slips into work mode. “We need to come up with a plan to weed out the compromised agents at HID.”

I interrupt, “We know that the boss, Richard, is involved because the agents that killed me mentioned that he would be pissed along with the mysterious guy that they are giving supes too. Even if I hadn’t overheard it, we could assume that he was, because the agents were using HID sanctioned vehicles and weapons. They also used the official clean up to sort everything out afterward and make sure that there wasn’t any evidence of the crash left behind.”

“That’s true. Can you remind me? I remember you saying that there were other agents there, but did you recognize them?” Ransom asks me.

I nod, “Yeah, I know who they are. Well, I know who three of them are, that I can say for certain are compromised. The agents that did the clean-up though I have no idea who they are since I was too far away to see or hear anything.”

“That’s good, we at least have a starting point of who we can look into,” Reed adds.

“If I can get close enough to his computer, then I’m sure I can get us some more names. Richard likes lists, he has lists of lists, and I am almost one hundred percent sure that he will have a list of agents that are working with him. He will most likely have information on what they have been up to as well. I have no idea how he managed to become the head of HID. He isn’t that bright.” I explain with a frown, “Although, he has been running the corrupt side for fuck knows how long without anyone really picking up on it, or if they have, without them being able to do anything about it, so I guess he can’t be as stupid as he seems to be.”

“I don’t think that it would be a good idea for you to go anywhere near HID, and especially not anywhere near Richard,” Doc says.

“Doc is right. Richard ordered you to be killed. We don’t want to risk him realizing that you are alive. Especially since they know that you were very definitely dead, so the fact that you are alive will most likely get back to whoever is taking the supes,” Evander agrees.

“That would be really bad,” River frowns. “Especially since we don’t know why he wants the supes.”

My frown deepens, “I don’t like it since I feel like I’m responsible for HID because I was a part of their organization, but you are right. It wouldn’t be a good idea for any of them to realize that I am still alive, and if I go to HID headquarters, then there is a good chance that I could be spotted.”

“We can still use your idea though,” Reed says. “We have some really good hackers at SID, and we can send in a team to get that information.”

I nod, “I think it’s probably our best shot at getting the information that we need to take down the corrupt people in HID as quickly as possible. Otherwise, it’s going to get complicated and involve a lot more of following agents, and that means a risk to our agents.”

River nods, “Yeah. We already know that they pose a significant threat to supernaturals, and obviously, those investigating will be supes. We need to make sure that everyone proceeds with caution. They must have something at their disposal that means they can easily subdue supes.”

“Fuck,” Griff curses. “You’re right. I hadn’t thought about how they are getting the supes.”

“Let’s get Ty on the phone,” Evander suggests, “I need to talk to him about an update for what happened at the clearing anyway, and we can suggest your idea and warn

him that everyone needs to be extra cautious.”

“I think you will probably need to emphasize that point,” I say. “Supernaturals tend to have a habit of underestimating humans, and therefore not keeping their guards up, and in this situation, that would be particularly dangerous.”

I know that because I have used that to my advantage a few times. The supes that I have been up against haven’t realized until it’s too late that they shouldn’t underestimate me.

“Yeah, you’re right,” Doc replies.

Evander pulls out his phone and presses a few buttons before holding it in the palm of his hand. I’m assuming that he hasn’t forgotten how a phone is supposed to work and has instead put it on speaker so that we can all hear the conversation, and he doesn’t have to waste time in relaying it all back to us later on.

My brain is doing that weird side quest thing that it likes to do regularly, and I have to force it to pay attention again so that I don’t miss anything important.

“Hey guys, I was actually just about to call you,” Ty answers with a warmth that I am definitely not used to hearing from a boss.

“We were just calling to get an update on the clearing and fill you in on the HID corruption case as well,” Evander explains.

Ty launches straight into the update that we have asked for. “We scoured the area, we had our best shifters working on trying to find any scents that were out of place. We also had mages and elementals working on seeing if they could pick up any magical signatures that would give us an idea of what was going on, along with multiple other agents, and we came up empty. The magical fire burned hot and fast, and we barely

got it under control before it spread even more. Whatever evidence was left behind was turned to ash. Including the bodies. It would have been really handy to have at least one of them so Doc could have done his thing, and we could have at least linked them with the other hybrid cases.”

“I was afraid you were going to say that, although I’m not surprised,” Evander replies.

“I read your reports,” Ty adds, “from what you have described, I think it’s safe to say that it was super disturbing. I don’t know of a supernatural creature that can make bodies behave that way when the supernatural isn’t even present.”

“Whoever was behind it could have been there,” Raiden says, “he or she may have just been cloaking themselves, and we were too busy focusing on the melting bodies and then running from the fire that we didn’t pick them up.”

“That’s very possible,” River agrees. “The smell of the bodies and then the fire pretty much overtook my nose, so I wouldn’t have necessarily picked up on a new arrival if they weren’t already in the clearing.”

“Okay, well, I can’t decide if that’s reassuring or not. Either way, the fact that whoever it is can use portal magic is worrying because you have to be pretty fucking strong to do that. It also gives them a massive advantage over us because they can simply pop in and out within moments,” Ty replies, sounding as frustrated as the rest of us feel.

“We will get them. They are going to slip up at some point,” Griff says.

Ty sighs, “Yeah. I just hope it’s sooner rather than later.”

“We all do,” Reed adds. “These hybrids are a real danger to everyone, and it’s a

fucking awful way to die having your own magic fighting against you because you have been turned into something unnatural.”

The room is silent for a moment as everyone absorbs what Reed is saying. He’s right, it’s a fucking horrific way to die, and we need to get to the bottom of it before whoever is behind it can turn any more supes against their will.

After a moment, Ty speaks again, “You said that you had an update on the case with HID?”

“Sort of,” Van replies. “It’s less of an update and more an idea that Neith had.”

Evander then goes on to explain my idea and the need for them to be particularly careful as there is a link to HID taking supes and giving them to an unknown entity.

“That’s a great idea, and I have a team in mind that would be perfect. They are more than aware of how dangerous humans can be and would proceed with the caution that this task will need. They also have an amazing tech guy on the team. Hacking into Richard’s computer will be a breeze for him,” Ty replies.

“That’s great,” Van says.

“Actually, now that I am thinking about it, I agree that Neith should not be anywhere near HID, and I think that it would be best if that were for the whole operation. We don’t want HID realizing you are alive and relaying that back to whoever it was that was interested in you. We need them to carry on thinking that you are dead. So, with that in mind, I think it would be best to take you off the HID case and have you just focus on the hybrid case. The other team that will be trying to find this information that Richard might have on his computer is more than capable of taking point on this.”

Evander nods in agreement, “Yeah, I think that’s probably best.”

I can’t help it, I chime in, “Can I request that when they are able to bring him in, I’m there? He caused me a lot of shit, and I would like to be there when he finally gets what is coming to him.”

“I can agree to that,” Ty says and then adds, “however only if it won’t be risking your safety, understood?”

“Understood,” I reply with a smile.

Ty stays on the phone for a short while longer before he hangs up.

“I’m not surprised that there was no evidence left in the clearing, but I was really hoping for some sort of good news to tell Navy. Her graduation is coming up pretty soon, and I wanted to be able to give her some sort of peace for it.” I say with a frown.

“I know. It would have been nice to tell her something about her brother’s disappearance and death,” River agrees.

“She is an agent, or very nearly one. She has done jobs herself, and she will understand better than anyone that, in most cases, there is no quick resolution,” Griff says.

I sigh, “Yeah, that’s true. I guess now that we are only on the hybrid case we can at least make that our entire focus, and hopefully get some answers.”

“Exactly,” Reed replies.

“Food’s here,” Ransom says but makes no move to get up.

Doc smirks, “I’m guessing that you want me to get it?”

Ransom chuckles, “Would you want to move right now?”

Doc’s eyes meet mine, and he shakes his head, “No, I wouldn’t.”

He disappears, and I don’t think I will ever get used to how quickly he can do that. I glance back over my shoulder at Ransom, “When you checked the wards around the property, did you find anything to suggest that there was a breach? I remember you mentioning that you were reinforcing the wards, and I felt your magic go out, but I don’t know if you found anything. I was sort of focusing on not freezing to death.”

Ransom smiles, “Yeah, we actually all got distracted by the fact that you were injured. I did check the wards, and there were no breaches that I could find. There were no spikes of magic or anything like that, either. It is possible that the lake and the kelpies have always been here but have managed to conceal themselves until now.”

“Really?” I ask, “But you guys have been here for a while, how are they surviving if you are the only people on the property? Isn’t their main food source, people?”

Raiden shakes his head, “No. They prefer to eat people, but they are scavengers and will eat pretty much anything. So, any animals that used the lake as a water source and any fish living in the lake would sustain them too.”

“Okay, that explains how they have survived, but it still doesn’t explain why, if they have been here since before you even owned the property, then why would they make an appearance now, and try and eat me?” I ask.

Neith

The guys all look just as confused as I am.

“I have no idea, but as I said when we were at the lake, the imps are behaving oddly too,” Evander says, “That’s obvious since I can count on one hand when I have seen them around the property and by that I mean in the woods, they never come up to the house, and they never interact with us. Yet, they spoke to you and sent you on some weird kind of mission.”

“We still don’t know the reason why they sent you or even where they sent you when they made you do that task,” River adds.

“Actually, I spoke to Winston just before Raiden and I left this morning, he said that it sounded like the imps sent me to a place called Luesidious, I have no idea if I am pronouncing that right. Have any of you heard of it?”

“I’m back,” Doc says unnecessarily as he pops back into the front room with all the food.

The guys quickly get up to help him, and the conversation is momentarily forgotten as we all work at unpacking the food, spreading it out the table and getting plates and cutlery. It remains quiet as we all start eating, before Reed picks the conversation back.

“So, we know where the imps sent you,” Reed starts.

“We do?” Doc questions, having appeared after I told them the name of the place.

I nod and repeat, “Luesidious. Do any of you recognize it?”

Unsurprisingly, everyone shakes their heads.

“No, I’ve never heard of it before,” Griff replies. “Did Winston tell you anything else useful?”

I shake my head, “Nope. He pretty much told me the name of where they sent me, and then said leave it with me and disappeared.”

“Well, that’s helpful,” River mutters sarcastically.

“We’re going to look into it when we get some spare time to go to the library and look into everything else,” Raiden tells them.

“Good idea.”

After that, the conversation changes and moves on to lighter topics. The guys splitting off into different groups to talk about different things and we just enjoy the meal together.

As soon as we are done eating, I find that I am unable to stop myself from yawning repeatedly, so I decide to head up to bed. I have the poker game with Sully tomorrow, and Reed mentioned getting a start on my sword training as well, so I’m going to need as much sleep as I can get. Especially since today has already taken its toll, and my body has had a damn good workout and is going to be sore as hell tomorrow as it is.

I say goodnight to the guys, and head up to my room, while they stay up and mention

something about watching a movie.

They have actually had a somewhat relaxing day. Shopping or sorting out their garages. I envy them, honestly, because apparently, it's my fucking destiny to get attacked at every single opportunity that could even remotely present itself. I mean, I have always been pretty accident prone, and because of the whole dying and coming back to life thing, I often put myself in extremely dangerous situations, usually for a case. But the last few days that I have been with the guys have been really insane, and I'm just hoping that it calms down.

Even if it's just for a day, at this point, I will take a day where nothing actively tries to kill me.

As I trudge up the stairs, my legs feeling heavier with every step that I take, it occurs to me that I never asked the guys how they found me or even how they knew to come and look for me, although I'm assuming that some sort of magic played a part.

I am also starting to realize that the spirit guides must only show up for certain things because none of them showed up when the kelpies were trying to eat me. If I'm being honest, I have no idea why I have them or what makes them appear and help when they do. Frowning, I try to think back to when they have appeared and if there are any connecting factors that could at least shed a little bit of light on when they help.

They all showed up in the woods when I was on the way here, and they helped me get to the guys. Winston then showed up in my bedroom and scared the shit out of me, but I think that he was just saying hello then. I also get the feeling that Winston doesn't tend to do what he's supposed to do.

The next interaction I had with them was when I called them, so that doesn't count. Then Winston showed up in the clearing after I died. I'm not quite sure what he did since I was entirely in the Darkness for everything until I woke up, but I'm going to

assume that he told Ransom to put the golden bubble thing up around us. The following interaction was when we were still in the woods, but it was with Wallace who showed up and stopped me from collapsing. He also gave Raiden some sort of information that helped me and prevented me from dying again so soon after I had already died from being stabbed in the heart when I saved Reed.

I still don't know what that was, and it's niggling at me. Especially since if I really concentrate, I can feel Raiden's magic. It's a nice feeling. I like it, and it makes me feel closer to him, which is kind of nice, but I want to know why it's there and what it means. Maybe I will bring it up when we have our library date. The worst thing that he's going to do is tell me no. I can handle that.

I have managed to distract myself again, I force my mind to go back to thinking about the spirit guides and when they show up, trying to find the link. Pushing through my bedroom door, finally, I grin. They show up when I'm very nearly dying or just after I have died. Which means that either someone dropped the ball when I got attacked by kelpies, or I wasn't really at any risk of being killed again.

So, if they show up and I haven't called them, then we can assume that the situation is really fucking bad.

Although they show up in those situations, they don't really do anything except offer advice and guidance. I guess that's the whole point of spirit guides, I mean it's in the name, they guide. But my point is they only seem to help stop the second deaths from happening. Winston didn't stop me from throwing myself between the knife and Reed, but Wallace spoke to me and supported me when I nearly died again in the parking lot and gave Raiden some advice that clearly saved me from dying again.

I frown, my tired brain beginning to hurt, although I think that I am finally starting to understand the way that the spirit guides might work.

“What are you thinking so hard about?” Winston asks, his voice making me jump. I glance up from the floor and see him lounging on my bed again.

I smile, “You guys, actually. I’m trying to figure out when and why you show up because you didn’t when I almost got eaten by kelpies.”

He tilts his head to the side and studies me, “We don’t interfere unless we really have to.” He levels me with a dry look, “We really have to with you, a lot.”

I wince, “Yeah, I’m sorry about that.” His eyes twinkle as he gives me a little raccoon smile and nods. I figure that’s all he’s going to say on the matter, so I decide to try my luck and ask, “Is this a social visit, or are you feeling up to answering some questions?”

Winston levels me with a look that says, ‘nice try’, and then becomes serious, “The path ahead is difficult.”

I shrug, and barely contain my eyeroll, “So everyone keeps implying, although no one is willing to tell me why.”

“That is because most of us are unsure why,” Winston replies. “All we know is that it is going to be difficult and incredibly dangerous. It’s going to stretch you to the edge of what you think you are capable of and then push you far beyond it.”

“Great,” I reply snarkily. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to be snappy with you, it’s just I’m getting a little bit fed up with all the non-answers. No one can even tell me what the fuck I am!”

Sympathy flashes through Winston’s eyes and my shoulders slump. I know that he’s not about to fill me in on what I am and give me an answer that I so desperately want. The thing is, until I actually hear the words or have solid proof, I still don’t believe

that it's real and that I am, in fact, a supernatural. I just keep thinking that they have the wrong person. That all of these people think that I am someone that I'm not and that when they find out who I really am, they are all going to abandon me.

Whoa, okay, there was some proper deep truth in that thought, and like a grown adult, I'm going to pretend that I didn't think that and instead file it away for my therapist, the one that I don't have but should really probably invest in.

Winston sighs and gives me a look that makes me think that he may have just heard all of my inner ramblings. His look is so knowing that I can't help but do a quick check of my mental shields to make sure that they are still up, and I only end up making myself feel confused when I realize that they are. The only things that are in my head are the voices buzzing away like they usually do.

"Neith, no one is telling you what kind of supernatural you are because we don't know," Winston says, finally giving me some truth and shocking the shit out of me at the same time.

"How can you not know what I am?" I ask, and then immediately follow it up with another question, "I thought you all knew my parents?"

"Technically, yes, the situation is extremely complicated, and I have already shared more than I should have with you," Winston tells me.

I pinch my nose, trying to contain the sudden burst of anger that tries to make me say shit that I do not mean.

"Thank you for telling me. Once again, though, I am left with more questions than answers," I reply.

"Your parents loved you," Winston tells me.

It seems like a really odd thing to say, and I'm at a loss as to how to respond. Fortunately, the decision is taken out of my hands when Winston's eyes land on something behind me.

Glancing over my shoulder, I ask, "What is it?" turning back toward him, I add, "Oh my fuckery is it a spider? I would rather go back to the kelpies than fight off a spider right now. I have very definitely reached my limit for what the fuck I can handle today."

Winston doesn't even smile at my completely inane ramblings, which makes me worry even more that he is seeing something that I'm clearly not; all I can see is Betty and my sword. So, it did come back after it helped me with the kelpies, and it is once again spotlessly clean. That is so fucking cool. I really need a name for it. It has saved my life twice now, and it deserves a name.

"Where did you get that sword?" Winston asks me, ignoring absolutely everything that I have said and hopping off of the bed as he moves toward the sword.

I frown, "I thought I told you. Although you did just suddenly disappear, so maybe I didn't. You know I told you about that realm that the imps sent me to do that weird test? Well, I got it there. That's how I was able to kill the backward knee creature thing. I found it under a bush. It's enchanted and a bit grumpy, so I wouldn't recommend touching it. It zapped Reed, and I had to tell it to behave before he could touch it."

Winston's eyes are still on the sword, but he's stopped about half a meter away from it and is just staring at it. I move so that I can see his expression. Before I can ask him why he looks so shocked, he speaks.

His voice is full of awe as he mutters, "No. No, it can't be?"

Then, just like that, he's gone.

"You have got to be fucking kidding me!" I can't help but yell at whoever might be listening.

I am getting really fucking sick of shit like that happening. Why couldn't he have waited around for an extra two minutes to tell me what the fuck was going on? Oh wait, let me guess, it's because I can't know yet.

I take a deep breath, willing myself to calm down.

Bed.

That's what I need, I need to get some sleep, put this day behind me and focus on the things that I do know, not the things that are out of my control. I will get the answers that I want, one way or another but not tonight, tonight I'm going to get some much-needed rest.

With this in mind, I don't waste any more time as I strip off down to my underwear and snuggle under the covers. I love pyjamas, which is why I bought some, but I don't like sleeping in them. They get all twisted up around me, and I fucking hate it and end up stripping them off anyway. Apparently, River's shirt was the exception to that, but it smelled like him, and I loved that.

I really need to steal another one of his shirts. I'm hoping that I will eventually have one from each of them, although I am aware of just how fucking insane that sounds. Fortunately for me, no one but me can hear the thought. Well, the voices might be able to, but as I have never been able to communicate with them in any way, I'm just assuming that they can't hear my thoughts.

If they can then I feel sorry for them, my mind is a messy, confused and dangerous

place at the best of times and some of my thoughts are not entirely sane.

Okay brain, that's enough random internal babble now is the time to switch off and go to sleep. The voices are a distant hum in my mind, which sort of acts like white noise and even though my brain never actually shuts up, I do find myself drifting off into what I hope will be a restful sleep.

My last thought before I fully succumb is that I really should find out more about kelpies if I am going to have one as a friend.

The next morning, I wake up quite early since I went to sleep so early, and I feel surprisingly refreshed which makes a nice change. Another bonus is I didn't shoot the wall, have a nightmare, or have any of the guys in here because I screamed and freaked out about something.

I frown, I really haven't made a very good impression, have I?

Taking a quick shower, I then dress in something comfy since I am supposed to be training with Reed today at some point and realize that in the shopping trip yesterday, I neglected to pick up any workout clothes, so I'm going to have to make do with leggings and a tank.

Hopefully, I can grab one of the guy's laptops today and order some more stuff. Including another phone and a laptop so I don't have to keep relying on the guy's ones.

As I pull open my door, I look down just in time to avoid stepping on a tray that holds a laptop, a chocolate pastry thing, and a still-steaming cup of coffee.

There is a note folded on top of the laptop, and I quickly pick it up.

“We have gone for a run around the property, didn’t want to disturb you since you need your rest after yesterday, and if I remember correctly, ‘running is the devils sport’, magic is keeping the coffee hot. Get what you need, and we will be back soon. If you need us Griff says to use his phone.”

I burst out laughing. I know for a fact that Evander wrote this even without him signing it. I told him many times about my distaste for running. I only run if I have to, and that’s usually because I’m running away from something that is trying to kill me or I’m running toward something that needs saving. I honestly can’t think of anything worse than voluntarily going for a run.

Yuck.

I know that people find it enjoyable and relaxing and that’s great for them, it’s just never really been my thing and Van knows that. I’m glad he didn’t try to wake me up to go for a run, I can’t imagine that would have ended well for any of them.

Picking up the tray, I turn back around and head into my room, closing the door behind me with my foot and smiling when I see Griff’s phone hidden amongst the stuff on the tray. It’s really fucking sweet that he wants to make sure that I can get hold of them if I need to.

I set everything on my bed, being careful not to spill anything, and then grab the coffee, taking a long gulp as I walk over to the desk and sit down, grabbing a pen and a piece of paper so that I can make a list of what I need to get. If I don’t, then I’m likely to end up with a whole load of shit that I don’t actually need and nothing that I do. I put phone right at the very top.

Neith

Once I have written everything down, I take the list and my coffee back to the bed and get myself comfortable. I may not like to go actual clothes shopping, but I love shopping online. Mainly because I can do it from my bed.

I have no idea how long I have been shopping for, but River came to bring me lunch and chat for a bit at one point, and I have gotten everything that I needed and a few things that I wanted which was a novel experience for me. I also got some essentials that I forgot yesterday, like extra shampoo and conditioner and things like that. Even though it's the weekend I have paid extra for next day shipping and I'm guessing that Ransom is going to do his thing and make sure that no one remembers the location of the house and there is no trace of it online. It seems like it would be a really complicated task, but he doesn't seem to be bothered by doing it so I'm just going to put it down to magic and Ransom's awesomeness.

I added everything up as I bought things and I am actually wincing at the total, but even though I have spent more in one go than I think I have ever spent in my life, excluding my house, it still hasn't made a dent into the total amount that is left on the card. I can't believe how much my life has changed in less than a week.

Last week I was trying to find enough money to get some food in the house and working extra shifts at Bobby's so that I could start to restock my healing supplies, and now I have just bought myself a whole new wardrobe of clothes and not from a thrift store either. I haven't got myself things just because they are cheap, I have

bought myself things that I actually really like, things that are in my style and that I actually want to wear.

I like it.

Before I can get too focused on how much my life has changed in so many ways, there is a knock at the door. Stretching my back out as I walk, I realize that I must have been sitting in the same position for far too long, because I feel more stiff than I should.

“Hey,” I greet Reed happily.

“Have you managed to get everything done that you wanted to?” he asks me with a smile.

I nod, smiling proudly as I say, “Yeah. I just finished actually. Please tell me that you are here to tell me that it’s time to do sword practice because I have been sitting still for far too long, and I’m now feeling really twitchy.”

Reed’s smile widens, “Actually, yes that’s exactly what I was coming to get you for.”

“Thank fuck,” I grin. “Let’s go.”

As I start to move out of the door though, I feel magic start to build in the air, it’s not Reed’s magic and none of the others are with him so it’s not them either. Although I can now pretty confidently say that I could recognize their magic now, and this magic that is building is not one that I recognize.

It takes me a moment, but I soon realize that it’s the sword.

Turning around to look at it, I put my hands on my hips, and aware that I probably

look like I am crazy, I narrow my gaze on my sword, “I get that you want to come, and that you don’t like the idea of me practicing with other swords, however, I haven’t swung a sword in a really long time, apart from when we killed that backwards knee thing, and when you helped me with the kelpies, which I really fucking appreciate by the way, you’re awesome. I would like to practice with a normal and boring sword before I start practicing with you, this practice session is just to test where I need to improve. As soon as we have worked that out then I can start practicing with you and we can figure out what we can do together.”

The magic that was building disappears and I’m going to take that as a sign of the sword's agreement.

Reed’s eyebrows are in his hairline as he looks between the sword and me, “Your sword certainly gets jealous pretty easily.”

I roll my eyes as I shut my door behind me, “Yeah, trust me to have an enchanted sword that gets so easily jealous. At least it didn’t try to stab me this time.”

“I’m not sure it really tried to stab you the first time, I think it knew that you were going to catch it.”

I pull a face, “I would definitely like to think that.”

He chuckles, “Come on, let’s see how rusty you really are.”

I practically bounce the whole way down to the gym. As I have mentioned before, it has been a long time since I have been able to properly practice with a sword and it is one of my most favorite things to do. As we are warming up, making sure that nothing is going to get strained during the practice, I have to admit that some nerves start to bubble in my belly. I really don’t want to make a fool of myself, and Van talked me up to the others, which of course means that they are here as well, everyone

apart from Doc who seems to be missing. I don't really mind that the guys are here, but I really don't want to be so rusty that I look like I have never handled a weapon before. Logically I know that I can't be that rusty since I've used my sword twice now to save my life, but what if that was all the swords doing and had nothing to do with me?

Evander wasn't entirely wrong in what he was saying to the guys, I do seem to have a natural affinity with weapons, swords especially, but that was when I was practicing every day.

"Alright, since I know that you like your swords, is there a particular style that you like to fight with?" Reed asks me.

The guys all stop pretending that they are working out or practising themselves and all turn to watch. I decide the best thing for me to do is to pretend that they aren't there. It will just make me too nervous otherwise.

I shrug, "I like most swords. Anything that has a point is good with me, so I'm happy to practice with anything. My favorite weapon to fight with though is a double-bladed, double-edged sword, that shit is fun. Oh, I had this double-bladed dagger once, that had a knuckle guard that had another blade on it," I sigh lovingly, "that thing was fucking awesome. Oh, my fuck, I could get one made for me couldn't I?"

The guys are all looking at me with amused and slightly shocked expressions.

Raiden mutters, "Damn, Van, you weren't kidding she really does love her blades."

Griff grins, one of his rare proper smiles as he says, "You talk about blades like I have heard women talk about clothes and shoes. It's fucking awesome."

I shrug, "I like pointy things."

“Yes, you could get one of those double-bladed daggers made,” River replies, answering my early question. “We have someone that we go to when we want our weapons made, he is absolutely amazing and can design it any way that you want. I was actually talking to him a week or so ago and he was saying that he is getting bored of making normal weapons and wished that someone would ask him for something a bit more unique. He’s going to fucking love your request!”

I start bouncing, “That’s awesome when can we go? Wait, are you talking about Lewis? I met him in town yesterday when I went with Raiden.”

River smiles and nods happily, “Yeah that’s him. He’s amazing at what he does. I’m not sure when we could go but maybe Tuesday, unless something comes up with the case. You have got Sully’s poker game tonight. The training academy trip is on Monday, and I think that Raiden wants to show you the library and go through all of the things that we need to research tomorrow.”

Raiden interrupts before I can reply, “We can do that another time, or I can make a start on it tomorrow and then you can help me out and come see the library another time.”

I shake my head, “No way, I have got questions that I need answered and as excited as I am about getting my blade designed, that can wait. Some of the things that I want to look into can’t. It’s like an itch in my brain currently.” I frown. “I know that sounds really weird but that’s the only way that I can think to describe it.”

“I get that,” Raiden admits.

“Thank fuck for that because everyone else is looking at me like I’m weird,” I grin. “Alright, let’s do this. Don’t laugh if I’m shit.”

“Neith, none of us would do that,” Griff reassures me.

Reed hands me a short sword and holds up one for himself as well.

“I figure the best way to see what needs to be worked on is to see what you currently know and remember, so we’re going to spar,” he tells me. “These are practice blades, but they will still hurt like a motherfucker because we keep our practice blades sharp enough to cut. People have a tendency to get lazy in their practices if there isn’t a real threat of injury.”

“That’s smart,” I reply. “I’m used to practicing with proper blades, I never practiced with blunt or wooden ones. I didn’t really see the point.” I snicker at my inadvertent joke, “ha! Point, get it.”

River snorts clearly having the same level of humor that I do while the others just shake their heads and look amused.

“I like that,” River grins.

Reed shakes his head but has a smile playing around his lips as he gains my attention and tries to get me back on track.

“If at any point, you need me to stop, for whatever reason, just yell stop and I will,” Reed tells me, all amusement dropping from his expression.

I nod, “I expect I won’t get too far into this exercise before I’m needing to stop.”

“I’ll take it slowly and then pick up speed and complexity the longer that we practice until we reach a point where you need to stop,” Reed replies.

“Got it,” I grin. “Let’s do this.”

My smile drops as I focus on the fight. Reed is substantially bigger than me and in a

sword fight that means that he has certain advantages over me, although because I'm smaller it should technically mean that I am faster than he is and can't dart around him a lot easier. That usually applies to humans though and Reed is a strong and powerful supernatural. I have no chance of winning this but then again, that is not the point of this exercise. I'm just really competitive. This isn't the time for that though.

Reed wasn't joking about starting slowly. He begins by using the most basic of things that we are first taught. I understand what he's doing but this is going to take forever if he's going to start with the very basics.

"How about you come at me, like we are properly sparing and throw more complicated stuff in there as we go?" I suggest as I block another one of his swings.

He stops and frowns, "Are you sure?"

I nod, "Absolutely."

Reed must see something in my expression because he nods, and without any real warning, charges at me. I grin; this is so much better. I see surprise light up his eyes when I manage to keep up with him, and I have to admit that I'm surprised too, it looks like I'm not as rusty as I thought I was.

Which means Van was right and there is no way that he is likely to let me live that down.

Unfortunately, I let my confidence make me sloppy and Reed manages to get through my guard and nick my arm, drawing that smallest amount of blood. He stops immediately and looks at me with concern.

"Damn it," I growl, "I let myself get too confident. Again."

I don't know what expression is on my face, but Reed doesn't even bother to argue as he simply lifts his sword and waits for me to attack this time. As we begin to fight again, I make sure that I don't allow myself to get overconfident. I want this to be a real test of what I am capable of and where I need to make improvements to get better. This time I allow myself to become completely focused on the fight, all other distractions disappear, and I am simply in the moment.

This doesn't mean that I am completely ignorant to what is happening around me, if one of the guys tried to attack me, I would know, it just means that I am not allowing myself to get distracted by things that don't matter.

We have been fighting for a while, and my muscles are burning but it's a good kind of burn, it's been a long fucking time since I had this good of a workout. Reed hits my sword at just the right angle and with enough force that it flies out of my hand, and I move out of the way before the blade makes contact.

"Watch this," I hear Van say, "Neith!"

Instinctively, and I don't know how, but I know that he has just thrown me another weapon, Reed must see it too because he swipes at my leg and doesn't stop fighting. I flip backward to avoid it, getting quite a lot of air and splitting my legs mid flip so I land one foot at a time, catching the staff with a blade on the end easily as I fall back down into a fighting stance. Reed looks shocked but I don't give him a chance to regain his composure as I take advantage of his momentary hesitation and use it to disarm him of his sword, spiraling my blade around his and tearing it free of his hand.

"Van," I call out, as I launch the staff toward the opposite wall. This is a game that we used to play, I had completely forgotten about it.

"Reed," Raiden says, as he throws a sword to Reed.

Evander chuckles as he throws two battle axes in my direction and makes everyone curse, until I easily pluck them out of the air.

“Axes, really?” I grin.

Reed and I start to spar again, using the different weapons. Every now and then Evander will throw a new weapon at me, and I have to catch it and dispose of the other weapons that I am using before I fight with the new one all while still avoiding the attacks from Reed.

“They have been at it for ages, and I’m starting to think that neither one of them is going to back down,” Griff says. “Someone needs to call it. They are going to end up hurting themselves in a minute if they aren’t careful.”

“That’s enough guys!” Evander calls, adding, “Weapons down.”

Reed immediately stops and smiles at me; I return it before I decide that the floor is a much better companion and lie down. Breathing heavily.

River

I am struggling with watching Reed and Neith fight. At first, I was okay, it was really fucking interesting watching Neith fight. There was definitely something supernatural about the way she fought. For one, she was keeping up with Reed and he wasn’t slowing down for her, he wanted to test exactly what she was capable, and while he started to move only at human pace, he increased his speed as she increased hers and as a bystander it was easy to see the surprise on his face when she started moving as quickly as he could.

My problem started when Evander started to throw different weapons at her, it was really fucking impressive to watch her so easily switch between the different ones,

and there is definitely something supernatural about her affinity with weapons, I have absolutely no doubt about that. But Reed also started fighting in earnest, as he realized that she was a formidable opponent and if he didn't then she was going to cause some serious damage to him.

Logically I know that Reed would rather get hurt himself than hurt Neith, I know that. However, she triggers something in me that I haven't felt before and it's something that I'm not used to dealing with. It happened when she was bleeding and everyone was taking too long to make sure that she was okay, and I can feel a similar thing happening now. The good news is that I now recognize it, and I am confident that I can control it. However, as it's still a new feeling for me, I'm going to need to practice controlling the feeling first and that means that I need to excuse myself.

"I'm just going to step out, I will be back in a moment," I say to Van.

He glances over at me, his smile faltering as he asks, "Is everything okay?"

I nod, and answer honestly, because what would be the point in lying, "Yeah, those new instincts I have when it comes to Neith are not coping too well now that Reed has upped his game. I am fine, and don't feel the urge to defend but the feeling is new, so I need to make sure that I get a handle on it now so that I don't lose control over it in another situation."

Van nods, "I get that man, if your instincts are so strong about her though, we are probably going to need to look into why."

"Yeah, I know," I reply.

It's something that I have been thinking about, but I'm not entirely sure what looking into it is going to find. I don't have the answer for why my instincts have been triggered by her and honestly, I'm okay with the fact that they have, so long as I can

get control over them, and I don't end up trying to take on one of my brothers. That would be really bad, and not something that I want to do.

"If your instincts are triggering now, when you know that she is safe with Reed, then you are going to have to be careful about when they trigger when she is under threat. It will be a good thing in some circumstances but in others it could cause a big problem and let people know that she means a lot to you and us, which could be bad."

I scrub my hand through my hair, letting out a heavy sigh. That is also something that I am aware of. He's not telling me anything that I haven't thought of before.

"I know man, that's why I'm leaving to get a handle on it now. It won't take me too long to control it. Hopefully, I will have a handle on it before a situation like that arises."

Evander smiles and claps me on the shoulder, "I know you will."

I love that he has that much faith in me, I just hope he's right. Returning his smile, I glance once more at Reed and Neith and then head for the doors. I think fresh air is probably the best thing for it. With this in mind I head straight for the front of the house.

Before I can get there, I run into Doc, "Hey man, how was work?"

"All good, are you okay?" He asks, studying me closely.

I nod, "Yeah, I just need some fresh air. The guys are in the gym watching Neith kick Reed's ass."

His eyes widen as he grins, "Now this I've got to see."

I chuckle as he moves past me and then resume my task, and head toward the front door.

Neith

“Hey guys, River said that I would find you down here,” Doc says as he walks into the room. His tone changes from warm and friendly to concerned as he asks, “What the hell? Why the fuck would you push her that hard? She’s in pain, and severely dehydrated. I’m not actually sure how she is conscious.”

“What!” Reed exclaims the panic in his voice prominent, and echoed by everyone else in the room.

I roll my eyes, not that they can see, so instead I raise my hand and wave to gain their attention, “I’m good, honestly. You’re being dramatic. I just need a moment.”

“Why didn’t you stop me? I told you to say stop and I would,” Reed demands, looking down at me, all sweaty and gorgeous.

“Yum,” I mutter and his eyes widen slightly before he shakes his head.

I’m exasperating him. I do that to a lot of people; what can I say it’s a gift. Evander hands me a bottle of water and I smile gratefully before I start to chug it. Yeah, I definitely should have drunk more than coffee this morning.

Neith

I move so that I'm leaning on my elbows and look at Reed with a frown, "If I had stopped you when I got a little bit tired it wouldn't have been a good gauge for how out of shape I am with my sword practice. It also wouldn't be good practice for if I'm in a real sword fight, I can't just say, 'okay I know that you are trying to kill me, but can we stop for a moment, because I'm tired. Maybe we can pick it up again later?'" I raise my eyebrow, as the logic of my words sinks in.

Doc shakes his head, "While I see the logic behind your words, and I can admit that to a certain extent, you are right. You are currently more than a little bit tired."

"Semantics," I mutter, as I hop back up and start stretching out my muscles, so they don't cramp on me later.

Doc frowns at me, clearly he is not a fan of my answer.

"Neith, you should be a bit more careful," Van says.

I shrug, "Honestly, I am used to running on empty. I'm used to having to push my body past what it should be able to do, simply because I have no choice. I don't see the point in not training hard, but I will make sure that I hydrate properly and don't allow my stubbornness to cause me an injury. Deal?"

I can see it in Doc's eyes, he wants to argue with me, he wants me to say that I won't push it that hard again and that I will take it easier when I'm training. But he also knows that to a certain extent I am right. We are agents, and our jobs aren't safe. We

all need to be at the top of our game to make sure that we are safe.

“He’s giving her the look,” Reed smirks.

“Aw, you’re now officially part of the team, Nene,” Evander teases, “Doc gives us all that look from time to time as his doctor side wars with the logical side that knows we have to push ourselves.”

I grin, and smile up at Doc, “I really appreciate that you are looking out for me, but you know I’m right. Just like you know that they are right too, and that you most likely do exactly the same thing.”

Doc shrugs his eyes, as his lips lift into a smile, but he doesn’t confirm or deny that I’m right.

River

As soon as I am outside, I take deep breaths.

I am already controlling my reaction a lot better than I did the first time that it happened, I didn’t immediately scoop Neith up and not let anyone touch her, so at least there is that. I wanted to, don’t get me wrong, but I didn’t and that’s the key factor right now. The fact of it is the more it happens the better at controlling it I will be.

Admittedly it does take me at least twenty minutes or so to get a really good grip on my reaction, but I probably could have gone back in after ten minutes or so, I just wanted to make sure that I wasn’t going to go back too soon. It has been a long time since I have had to work on my reactions in certain situations, it makes me feel like a young pup if I’m being honest.

As I turn to head inside, a noise from the direction of the forest stops me and I turn

back around just in time to see Neith's kelpie come crashing through the trees and head straight for me. I drop down into a defensive crouch, calling on my magic but not letting it engulf me yet. I don't want to attack it, Neith is fond of it, and it did let me stroke it, but if it comes down to me or him and he attacks first, then I'm going to have to defend myself.

The kelpie doesn't attack though, it stops in front of me pawing at the ground with its hooves and snorting. It doesn't take me very long to realize that it is panicking about something, but I have no idea what. If he has come here though, I think that it is safe to assume that he wants help and most likely wants Neith.

"Do you need help?" I ask, feeling a bit ridiculous at first but that feeling quickly dissipates as the kelpie nods back. It can clearly understand me better than I can understand it. "Alright, I will go get Neith."

It nods again and stomps its hooves, clearly telling me that it's urgent and I need to fucking hurry up. I turn back toward the door and start to make my way inside, before I realize that he's following me.

"You can't come with me buddy," I tell him, but he pushes forward clearly wanting to get to Neith. If it's as urgent as he is making out, then we don't have time for this. "Back up. I will get Neith."

Without meaning to, I let some of my alpha power out through my voice, it most likely happened because the power was already so close to the surface. I have no idea how the kelpie is going to react to it but what I don't expect is for it to take several steps backward and then bow its head, conceding to me and doing as I have asked. Either it's decided that I was right, which is unlikely since it was so desperate to get into the house to get to Neith, or my alpha voice worked on it.

That shouldn't be possible.

Whatever the reason, I don't have the time to question it now, I need to get the others. I rush inside, making sure to shut the door behind me so it can't follow me, not that it will be able to if it is under the influence of my alpha voice, but doing so just in case anyway.

This is nuts.

Neith

"N eith!" River exclaims as he rushes back into the gym. I hadn't realized that he wasn't still in here, since I was so focused on Reed and Doc.

"Yeah, what's up?" I ask, already feeling better. I always tend to bounce back from a hard workout quicker than I should. I think it might be because I do it so regularly, which probably isn't a good thing and isn't something that I want to tell Doc about.

"Your kelpie is outside the front of the house and seems to be panicking. I have no idea why he's panicking but I barely managed to stop him from coming into the house after me when I said that I would go and get you." River explains urgently.

The voices stir, becoming louder in my mind, and I almost freeze as for only the third time in my whole life I actually understand what they are saying.

"Danger," the voices whisper.

It's not one voice, it's thousands all joined together to say that one word.

Well, fuck.

I rush out of the gym, heading for the front door with the guys hot on my heels. This can't be good. I was planning on going down to see him later, before we had to go to the poker game later, but this sounds concerning. Especially since kelpies are pretty

fucking near the top of the food chain and I have no idea what the hell could make a kelpie panic.

Unless River is reading the situation wrong.

As soon as I step foot out of the door, I see Mael pacing and snorting his ears pinned back, and it's obvious that River didn't read the situation wrong at all.

Shit.

"This doesn't look good at all," Griff says. "You need to be careful, Neith."

"I will, but he obviously needs help with something," I reply, as I rush out of the front door.

When I'm clear of the porch, Mael moves toward me, he ducks his head at the last moment and just like before, he flips me so that I land on his back. This time I'm not tired from almost dying, so I feel as his magic gently guides me and cushions my landing, so it doesn't hurt either one of us when I land on his back. My hands automatically start to hold his mane before I realize that there are reins, dark blue leather reins, and as I take a quick glance at his face, I realize that he's wearing a bridle, studded with green, black and blue gemstones, with golden runes that I can't read stamped into the dark blue leather and continuing up to the reins in my hand.

Whoa, that is seriously cool, but where the fuck has it come from?

Magic.

The guy's eyes are wide, as they watch me.

Opening my mouth, I quickly change what I was going to say when my sword appears in my hand. "Shit. this is bad, I'm guessing that the appearance of my sword

means that there is danger, arm up and then meet me at the lake.”

“Like fuck am I letting you go off into unknown danger by yourself,” Griff growls.

Swords suddenly appear in Doc’s arms, and he quickly passes them out.

“Problem solved, let’s go,” he mutters.

Mael takes off. It’s a damn good job that I know how to ride horses, because with no saddle, I’m having to rely a lot on my thigh strength in order to stay on, at least I have the reins though. Mael moves a hell of a lot quicker than a normal horse, and it’s fucking exhilarating, I would be more excited if we weren’t charging into unknown danger. Movement to my left catches my attention and I see River in his kitsune form easily keeping up with us. Looking around I realize that the others are all with us as well.

I become incredibly grateful that they can all keep up as soon as we break through the trees and see what is before us. The kelpies are all out of the water and in what can only be described as a battle with creatures that kind of look like a cross between an imp and a troll, except they are tall and thin, their heads easily reaching the tops of the kelpie’s backs where as mine only just reaches the bottoms of their bellies.

All of the imp troll’s have weapons and it’s clear that they are aiming to kill the kelpie’s and not capture them.

“What the fuck are they?” I ask no one in particular.

“Scavengers, they are after the kelpie’s scales and hearts, they make an absolute fortune on the Obsidian market,” Raiden is of course the one that replies to my question.

“Oh, hell no,” I reply. “Come on Mael, let’s do some damage.”

“Neith wait,” one of the guys says, but it’s too late, I am already charging toward the battle, my sword swiping through the Scavenger’s as they quickly realize that I’m a threat.

I use their shock at seeing someone riding one of the kelpies to my advantage and manage to swipe through a few before they realize what is happening and start to try and attack me. Suddenly the guys are there with me, helping to defend the kelpies, and killing the attackers with ease.

One of the scavengers gets in a lucky shot, striking Mael on his flank and making him cry out in pain. Anger burns through me, and using balance that I didn’t realize I had, I stand up on Mael’s back, and launch myself through the air, flipping and slicing through the neck of the scavenger that hurt Mael.

I have no time to celebrate the win as the scavenger’s immediately try to overwhelm me. A kelpie, not Mael, comes to my rescue wrapping its massive jaws around the neck of an attacker and biting through it like its butter.

Smiling in thanks at the new kelpie, I glance around me, and I’m shocked to see Doc riding one of the kelpies as they work together to neutralize the threat that is almost dealt with. He’s not the only one either, the kelpies are fighting side by side and working together with all of my men. I smile, this is a good thing.

I can feel it.

Mael, I need to check if he is okay. The Scavengers numbers have dropped drastically, and we will win in no time at all. The guys have it handled, but I need to check on Mael. I have no idea how badly he is injured. I duck and dive through the scavengers that are left as I make my way to where I can see Mael fighting a Scavenger.

He’s up, that’s a good thing.

The scavenger is so focused on Mael and trying to kill him, that he completely misses me coming up behind him. My sword drives into his heart, and I pull it out watching him crumple to the floor. I step over the dead body and start checking Mael over only to realize that he of course has supernatural healing, so his wound is already healed.

He nuzzles me gently, and I'm pretty sure that it's because he can sense that I was worried for him, I think he might also be checking that I am okay. I stroke him, and then turn around ready to get back into the fight and realize that it's done. All of the scavengers lay dead, scattered around us, and the guys are all talking to or stroking the kelpies.

I think it's probably safe to say that we aren't likely to get eaten by kelpie's any time soon. Not this herd anyway.

"Is everyone okay?" Evander asks, and everyone sounds off that they are.

"That was fun," River grins, "and I made a friend. He's called Reath, he had my back a couple of times."

I frown, "How do you know his name?"

River shrugs, "I'm assuming the same way that you know Mael's name. It just sort of blazed through my mind."

"Same," Reed says with a confused frown and points to the one standing next to him, "Thoreah."

My eyes widen, "Wait, do all of you have one that gave you its name?"

All of them nod.

"Guys, I know that's a big deal and something that we need to ask questions about,

but right now, we have a bigger issue,” Raiden starts.

Evander nods, “He’s right, we need to work out how they got in here.”

“Presumably the same way that the kelpie’s got in?” I ask, as I stroke Mael’s nose.

Ransom shakes his head, “No, I checked when we found the kelpie’s and there were no breaches. I did a really thorough check too.”

“Can you check again?” Evander asks.

Ransom frowns, “I don’t know how a breach could have occurred in the last day, without me knowing.”

“True, but something is going on. Something bigger than we are, it has to be because of the imps behaving badly and the kelpies either appearing out of nowhere or being here the whole time and only now suddenly deciding to let us see them. I think we have to question what we thought we knew,” Reed replies.

Ransom nods, “Yeah, you’re right. Give me a few minutes, I will do a really thorough check so it’s going to take me longer than it usually does.”

“Okay, take your time,” Van replies.

While Ransom is busy doing his thing, his magic growing around us, Doc looks around at all the bodies scattered on the ground and mutters, “The clean up is going to take a while, even with the help of magic.”

Mael snorts and gains our attention, the other kelpies stomping their feet, he looks at me and snaps his teeth.

“I think he’s trying to tell us not to worry about it because he and the other kelpie’s

will take care of it,” I say, a questioning note to my voice.

Mael nods enthusiastically.

“Well at least that’s something that we don’t need to worry about,” Van says.

“We have a problem,” Ransom says, his eyes opening and an urgent tension in his body, “we have a breach.”