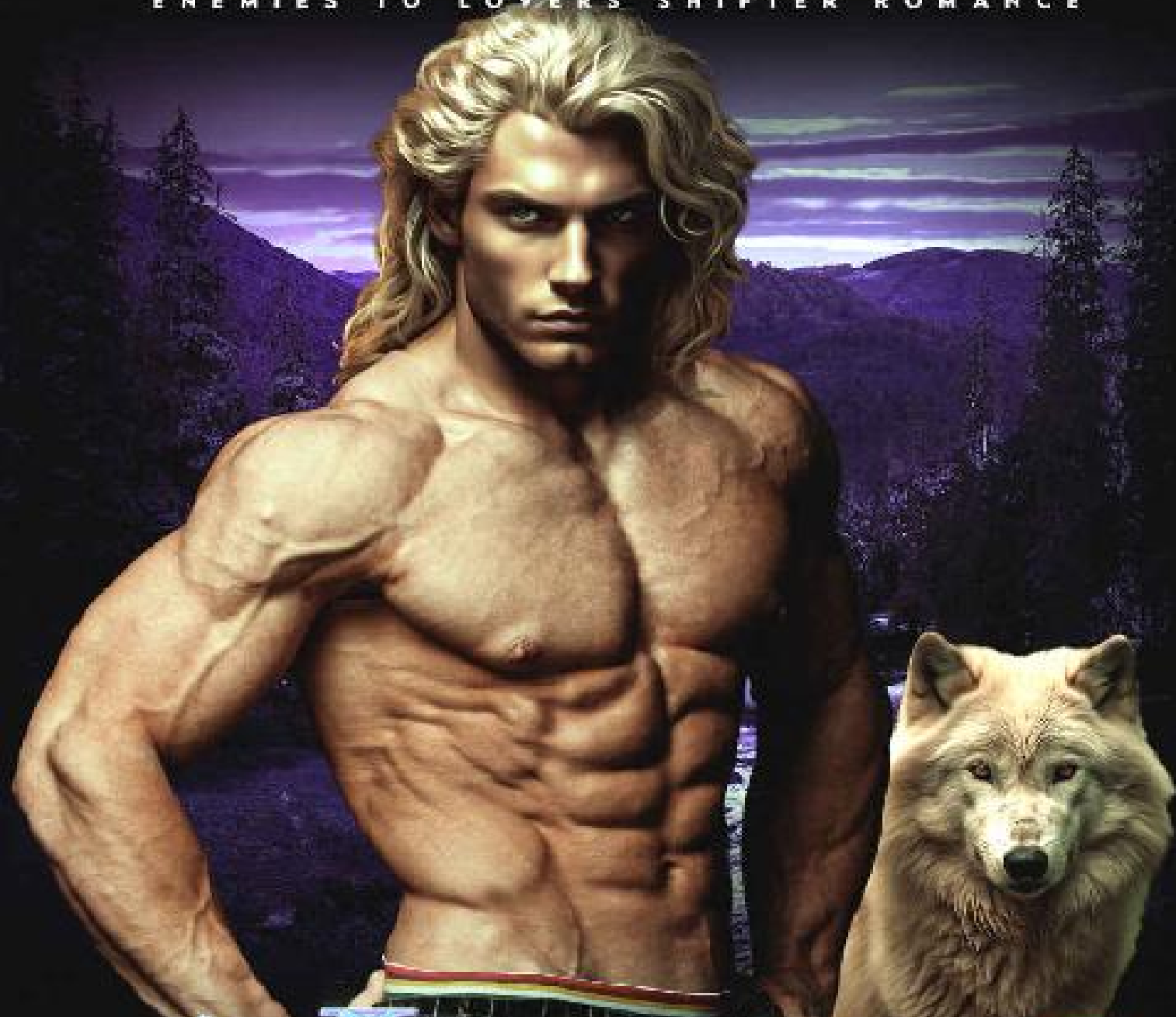


ENEMIES TO LOVERS SHIFTER ROMANCE



THE ALPHAS

FORBIDDEN MATE

ALPHA WOLF ISLAND

KAYLA WOLF

The Alpha's Forbidden Mate

Enemies to Lovers Shifter Romance

Alpha Wolf Island Book 5

Kayla Wolf



Copyright © 2023 by [The Wolf Sisters Books](#).

All rights reserved. This copy is intended for the original purchaser of the book only. No part of this book may be reproduced, scanned, or distributed in any printed or electronic

form, including recording, without prior written permission from the publisher, except for brief quotations in a book review.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Contents

[Chapter 1 - Torren](#)

[Chapter 2 - Lethie](#)

[Chapter 3 - Torren](#)

[Chapter 4 - Lethie](#)

[Chapter 5 - Torren](#)

[Chapter 6 - Lethie](#)

[Chapter 7 - Torren](#)

[Chapter 8 - Lethie](#)

[Chapter 9 - Torren](#)

[Chapter 10 - Lethie](#)

[Chapter 11 - Torren](#)

[Chapter 12 - Lethie](#)

[Chapter 13 - Torren](#)

[Chapter 14 - Lethie](#)

[Chapter 15 - Torren](#)

[Chapter 16 - Lethie](#)

[Chapter 17 - Torren](#)

[Chapter 18 - Lethie](#)

[Chapter 19 - Torren](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Books by The Wolf Sisters](#)

Chapter 1 - Torren

Torren had been rising before dawn for as long as he could remember. According to his parents, it had been the first sign of his competitive spirit—even as a tousle-headed toddler, he would insist on getting out into the world before the first light had touched it, as though determined to challenge the sun itself to a foot race. There was more truth to that than he liked to admit. Rising to find that the day had already begun while he was sleeping...it felt like defeat. And who wanted to start their day having already lost at something?

Just about everyone on Kurivon, for one, he thought sourly as he ran. He was midway through his usual pre-dawn lap of the island that had been his home for the past three years, and he hadn't seen hide nor hair of another wolf yet. It shocked him to realize how sleepy and comfortable their little community had become. Had it really been so long since they were fighting for their lives here? Since every day brought with it the exhilarating promise of going toe to toe with wolfkind's most ancient and hated foe? The last Torren had seen had been a pathetic excuse for a demon, the kind of thing a child could have brought down. And even that had been almost a month ago.

It was time to accept it. When it came to demons, Kurivon was clear. The battle was won. But Kurivon wasn't the only island in the archipelago, to Torren's great relief. Soon—tantalizingly soon—these lazy, sleepy days would be behind him, and he'd be flung once more into the rush of battle. And this time, he'd have his pack behind him.

That dream of the future was the only thing that had kept him going through the interminably boring slog of the last few months. It was going to be so good to be reunited with his pack. He'd missed them sorely. Sure, it had been nice to get to know the other Alphas he'd joined on this mission to Kurivon, especially back in the early days when they'd all been

completely focused on killing demons. But lately, they'd had less and less in common. With the exception of Blaine, they were all family guys now, settled down with their soulmates and working on increasing the island's population, one (admittedly very cute) baby at a time. All power to them, Torren thought. The family life was clearly making them all very happy, and the world needed more than just warriors.

Couldn't be him, though. The very thought of it made him shudder. Being stuck in that kind of routine, waking up every day with the same person, in the same house, doing the same mind-numbing tasks over and over to keep the kids fed and watered and the roof over your head...he couldn't imagine anything worse. It had been why he'd left home so young, still in his adolescence, already restless and frustrated by his pack's provincial life. He'd been a lone wolf for years after that, traveling the length and breadth of Halforst as he risked his life and honed his already considerable skill with a sword. For a long time, he had been so worried he might be ensnared by a pack one day and wake to find himself trapped in one place that he had refused to even work with other wolves.

But that was when he'd met Baltar, who'd shown him that there was more than one way to run a pack, that being part of a team didn't have to mean being stuck. The first time they'd worked together had been under duress—a troublesome demon had been haunting the edges of a small town, picking off unwary wolves one by one. The worried Alpha, who'd hired several solo demon hunters without success, insisted that the two of them work together to take down the threat. Torren had slipped away from the stranger at the earliest opportunity, reasoning that what the Alpha didn't know wouldn't hurt him, determined to claim all the glory of the battle for himself. In the end, Baltar had caught up with him just in time to save his life. And Torren wasn't the kind of fighter who'd let a challenge like that go unanswered. They began to travel together after that, Torren always insisting that he'd return to his lone wolf life as soon as he'd repaid the favor and evened the score—but before they knew it, the weeks had turned into

months, then years, and they'd both saved each other's lives more times than they could count.

It was simple mathematics. Two wolves together could take on much more powerful demons than one alone. And as the two of them made a name for themselves in their travels, it wasn't long before more warriors sought them out, interested in joining what Baltar and Torren eventually had to admit was a pack. They numbered an even dozen now—or, at least, they had when Torren left three years ago, leaving Baltar in charge. He was looking forward to their reunion, the inevitable sparks that would fly when Torren reclaimed his rightful position in the pack's hierarchy...and the fight that Baltar was going to put up.

Ever since they'd made the shift from a duo to a pack, Torren had been the Alpha, and Baltar had been nipping at his heels, perfectly willing to usurp that title if Torren ever gave him the opportunity. With a packmate like Baltar, Torren had no choice but to keep himself sharp as a knife, to push his strength and skill to new limits every day. It was the only way to keep up. To some, their relationship seemed unforgivably adversarial, even toxic. But Torren wouldn't have had it any other way. He trusted Baltar more than anyone he'd ever known—closer than a friend, closer than even a brother. Baltar would never pull punches, never let him slip, never let him get away with being anything but the best. Unflinching, brutal honesty, no matter what. That was the gift they gave each other. He'd missed that more than anything. And soon—very soon—he'd be getting it back.

Last week, the Council of Alphas had finally agreed to the request Torren had been making at every meeting for the last several years. They'd given him the go-ahead to bring his pack through the portal from Halforst at last. The now-peaceful island of Kurivon was home to several packs already, but though there was still plenty of space for expansion, Torren wasn't interested in the real estate here. For his guild of adventurers, there was only one destination that made any sense—the volcanic island that loomed to the west, a short but

choppy boat trip from Kurivon's placid shores. Rochmar, it was called. Unexplored, unmapped, and unknown, it was forbidden for any of Kurivon's wolves even to visit the narrow strip of beach on its eastern shore. Far too much danger lurked in the foreboding tropical jungle beyond, the impenetrable vegetation that ringed the island's central volcanic peak.

That was where they would make their home. That was where their destiny lay. Torren knew that as deeply as he knew the hilt of his sword. All these long, impatient months would be worth it once he felt his paws sink into the sand on that unfamiliar coast, the fiercest warriors in the world behind him.

Perhaps it was that daydream that distracted him, that reverie drawing his attention away for a few crucial moments. Or perhaps it was the months of peace here on Kurivon that had lulled him into a false sense of safety on his patrols. Whatever the cause was, Torren felt something that he hadn't felt in a long time as he came towards the end of his patrol. He felt surprise—and a brief but thrilling shock of adrenaline at the realization, too late, that he'd been ambushed.

He was knocked off his paws before he even saw the foe coming. A jumbled, incoherent impression of gray fur, an impact that struck him with surgical precision, just far enough above his center of gravity to throw him off balance and send his paws skidding on the sandy path. He felt himself hit the ground hard, a pair of jaws already finding purchase where his foreleg joined his shoulder, teeth digging through the thick fur to pierce the skin beneath. Instinct was already taking over, Torren's body twisting as he snarled and snapped at his attacker, but he was a few heartbeats too late, and he writhed in vain against the weight bearing him down. His racing mind struggled against the mixture of adrenaline and confusion. There had been no hint of demonic taint in the air, certainly nothing that would point to a manifestation powerful enough to knock him down like this. Then how...?

As abruptly as it had come, the weight was gone. Torren could still feel the sting at his shoulder where teeth had scraped at his flesh, but his relief was tempered by suspicion—

it was very unlike a demon to give up the opportunity for a killing blow. If he didn't know any better, he'd think he'd been ambushed by another wolf. But there was nobody on Kurivon who could take him unawares. Blaine had tried a few times—as the only remaining bachelors on the Council of Alphas, the two of them had done a fair bit of sparring over the last few months—but his formidable size and strength meant he could never get within a hundred paces without Torren hearing him coming.

His mind still racing, Torren scrambled to his feet, his wolf ready to kill or be killed. But then he saw who was waiting there, lounging against a tree, pretending to cover a yawn with one hand, and he felt the snarl in his throat shift immediately to a yelp of unmitigated delight. The man by the tree, the man whose silver eyes were dancing with a barely-hidden joy that matched Torren's own...that man was no demon. His dark hair was longer than Torren remembered, shot through with a little more silver than it had been when he'd left, and he could see a couple of new scars against his olive skin, but Torren would have recognized Baltar a hundred feet away in a blizzard.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Torren demanded, almost before he'd completed the transformation into his human shape, his voice roughened by the last vestiges of his wolf's anatomy. “We only made contact with the Council yesterday. The pack's not meant to come through until next week at the earliest—”

Baltar cut him off with a bruising hug, squeezing him so tightly he felt the breath rush out of his lungs before he could finish his sentence. Half-laughing, half-wheezing, he hugged his old friend back, dizzy with surprise...and already aware of a creeping sense of embarrassment that he'd allowed himself to be caught off guard like that. Baltar wasn't going to let it slide, he knew that much. But whether he'd be mocked now or later remained to be seen.

“Plans change, little man.” Torren rolled his eyes. Baltar was all of half an inch taller than him, something he

never missed an opportunity to rub in his face. Torren had at least managed to stop him using the nickname in front of the rest of the pack, though it had taken a series of blistering arguments and more than a few actual fights to make that lesson sink in. “An Alpha’s got to stay flexible. I suppose you’re out of practice, though.”

“I’m sure you’d love that,” Torren retorted, unable to hold back the grin that was swallowing his face. “I bet you’ve spent the last three years desperately hoping I’ll get lazy enough that a second-rate fighter like you might be able to take over.”

“Second rate,” Baltar mused. “I suppose that would make the wolf I knocked off the path and pinned... what, third rate? Fourth?”

“I’ll give you that,” Torren acknowledged. “You won that one fair and square. Enjoy the victory,” he added, before Baltar’s ego could swell too much. “It’ll be your last for a long while.”

“It’s good to see you,” Baltar said, cutting through the bravado unexpectedly. He’d always been good at catching Torren off-guard, his voice suddenly softening with genuine feeling. “Hunting’s never the same without you along for the ride, brother.” He tilted his head before Torren could reply, gaze narrowing. “Speaking of hunting, this island is *dead*. Is this really the fatal nest of demonic taint the Council were wetting themselves over?”

“Relax. Do you think I’d have stayed away this long if I didn’t think there was a worthy fight for us? This island’s done, but Kurivon’s an archipelago, Bal. We’re heading west. And trust me—what we’re gonna find out there will make all our war stories sound like child’s play.”

His second-in-command grinned his widest lopsided, toothy grin. “I’ll believe it when I see it. I’m not convinced you haven’t gotten soft out here.”

“If I’m honest, Bal, neither am I,” he admitted, grimacing. “It’s been hard to stay sharp without you and the pack around. Speaking of which,” he added, glancing up and down the half-expecting a dozen wolves stepping out of the trees. “Where are the rest?”

“Coming in a few days, just as planned.” Baltar’s silver eyes glinted in the early morning sun. “I’ve come through early as a courtesy. I was worried that after three easy years you might need a bit more time to adjust than you used to.”

“Adjust to what? Having you guys around slowing me down? Hardly,” Torren scoffed. But there was a look on Baltar’s face that he was beginning to remember from the old days... a look that told him his old friend was keeping something back from him. It was an expression that never boded well, at least where Torren’s peace of mind was concerned. That expression meant trouble. And for a moment, Torren had to suppress the urge to whoop for joy again. It was unbelievable how much he’d missed this. “What are you up to, you old trickster?” he demanded, unable to keep the laugh of recognition out of his voice even as he attempted to look stern. “You’ve got that smug look on your face, the one you wear when you think you’ve outsmarted me—”

“When I *know* I’ve outsmarted you,” Baltar corrected him haughtily. He always did dislike being reminded that Torren was a few years younger it was a reliable way of getting under his skin. “Besides, you love surprises.”

“I love nice surprises. Yours are rarely nice, unless your idea of a pleasant afternoon is fending off an assassination attempt—”

Baltar snorted. “That’s a melodramatic way of describing a good-natured prank. It’s not like it did any lasting damage, which is more than I can say for *your* favorite little game—” Baltar was pointing at an old scar on his throat, an old keepsake of a particularly enthusiastic sparring match between the two of them, and Torren wrestled him into a headlock, laughing. He’d missed Baltar every day he’d been

on this island, even more since the worst of the demon threat had passed. Part of him had worried things would be different between them once they were reunited. He should have known better than to expect his old friend to have changed.

“Let me give you the tour,” Torren suggested once they’d exhausted themselves wrestling like a pair of pups in the sand. “I’ll show you around Kurivon, and once you get bored of being a secretive old fool you can tell me what you’re up to.”

It wasn’t a long tour. It felt strange, showing Baltar around the little community they’d built over the last few years. Coming from almost nothing, every new addition to the little town had felt enormous—every new building, every additional cottage built to house a growing family of wolves... but now that he showed it to an outsider, he was aware of how small the town really was.

“So, three packs have settled here so far?” Baltar asked. They’d reached the steps of the Kurivon community center, which seemed as good a place as any to end the tour.

“Two, really,” Torren corrected him. “Belmont’s pack, and Reeve and Darion’s. They each brought their own packs originally, but they ended up combining them into one.”

“Leadership struggle, huh? Who won that fight?” Baltar’s eyes were glinting. “Who stayed Alpha?”

“Both of them. Co-leaders.” Baltar snorted in disbelief, and Torren hid a grin behind his hand. “It works for them,” he said with a shrug. “None of my business how another Alpha chooses to run his pack. Besides, they’re too busy with their kids to spend any time arguing over who’s in charge.”

“Poor guys,” Baltar said sadly, shaking his head as if in grief. “What about Renley? I heard he took down a whole Hive single-handedly back on Halforst. Tell me he’s not gone soft out here.”

“He’s Alpha of the whole settlement. Keeps him busy.”

“This place? There’s more demonic activity in my little finger than on this whole stupid rock, Torren. No way is this enough of a challenge for a legend like Renley.” Baltar scowled. “Wait. No. Don’t tell me he’s fallen to the dark side too.”

Torren nodded gravely. “He and his soulmate have twins.”

“Nightmare.”

“Belmont, too.” Torren felt himself warming to the subject at the look of undisguised horror on his best friend’s face. “Seriously, man. It’s an epidemic out here. It’s like as soon as we put a dent in the demons, everyone went baby crazy. Falling in love, settling down, all that soulmate crap... the only one who hasn’t fallen for it is Blaine. No idea what’s going on with that guy,” he added, thinking with a brief smile of the island’s resident giant. “He doesn’t talk about Halforst much. For all I know he’s got a soulmate and eight kids waiting on the other side of the portal. You have no idea how dire it’s been out here, Baltar.”

“Sounds like I got here just in time,” his friend said, shaking his head.

“Don’t get me wrong, I’m happy for ‘em. Someone’s gotta raise the next generation of demon hunters, strong community is what stops demonic taint taking hold in the first place, blah blah blah. I’m glad they’re happy playing house and changing diapers, but as far as I’m concerned—”

“—death would be preferable,” Baltar concluded, grinning. “Same page, buddy.”

Torren closed his eyes for a moment. “You have no idea how glad I am you’re here.”

“Well, you might want to hold off on that sentiment for a minute or two.” When Torren opened his eyes again, Baltar’s smile had spread into that same lopsided grin that had always been the herald of absolute chaos. “I haven’t told you about my surprise yet.”

“Your surprise.”

“Well, I never gave you a going away present. So think of this as...a reunion present.” Torren scanned his friend, frowning. He wasn’t carrying anything—even his usual extensive collection of concealed weapons seemed to be missing, save for the shortsword that never left his hip. “I’ll start with the part you’ll like. Our pack has grown.”

Torren tilted his head. “Your big surprise is that you obeyed the very simple instruction I left you with?” he asked drily. The pack had numbered an even dozen when he’d left three years ago. He’d instructed Baltar to do what he could to increase that number—without compromising on quality, of course. Only the fiercest and bravest fighters could be admitted to their hallowed ranks; only wolves with a shared ideological commitment to excellence at all costs. Certain critics had called them a reckless team of adrenaline junkies, a complaint they wore as a badge of honor.

“Six new recruits.”

Torren couldn’t help but be impressed. Baltar was a hard man to impress, more so even than Torren—it had taken them more than a decade for the pack to reach its modest size of twelve. “You found six wolves who were crazy enough to join us and tough enough to meet your ridiculous standards? In three years?”

“Well, we don’t all spend our days lounging on the beach,” Baltar said. But the glint in his eyes told Torren he didn’t know the full story yet. “Besides, once word spread, I had to turn away dozens of applicants. Hundreds, even. Only the best for my brother-in-arms.”

“Once word spread?” He frowned. As exciting as the prospect of moving to a new world to fight demons had been to Torren, Baltar, and their pack, he was well aware that most of the wolves of Halforst had very different priorities. “There was really that much interest in the mission here?”

“Not in the mission—though I made sure they were keen on that part of the deal too,” Baltar said with a grin. “The interest was in *you*, Alpha of mine.”

That was a bad sign. Baltar only called him Alpha when he was about to ruin his day, if not his whole week. “In me?”

“In you! Oh, I didn’t mention before you left? We’ve arranged a celebration to mark our beloved Alpha’s triumphant reunion with his pack. What better way to mark the occasion of getting settled into our demon-infested new home? The new members aren’t recruits, Torren. They’re competitors.”

“Competitors,” he echoed, his mind racing. If Baltar was saying what he thought he was saying... “If I didn’t know any better, Baltar, I’d think you’d overstepped your authority about a hundredfold. Tell me I’ve got sand in my ears.”

“Oh, but you’re hearing me loud and clear.” Baltar’s grin looked like it was about to split his cheeks. “We’ll be holding the archipelago’s first Soulmate Games, right here. And it’s your hand the ladies will be competing for, Torren. You’re welcome.”

There was a long silence while Torren waited in vain for his friend to reveal that he was joking. “You’ve told half a dozen of Halforst’s most capable demon huntresses that they’re coming here to compete to be my mate?” he asked at last, feeling a mixture of fury and bewilderment coursing through him. Soulmate Games... they still happened occasionally, in certain parts of Halforst that still cleaved to strange old traditions. But it was much more common to refer to the practice as the punchline of a joke. There was no way Baltar was serious about this.

“What better way to find yourself a lady?” Baltar asked, eyes wide with manufactured innocence. “You’ve told me yourself, all these other Alphas are settling down with their soulmates— isn’t it time you did the same? Come on, Torren. You can’t look me in the eye and tell me you don’t love it

when women fight over you. We've known each other too long.”

Torren couldn't decide whether he wanted to punch his friend or burst into laughter. He settled for a mixture of the two, roaring with mirth as he drove his fist into Baltar's belly. His friend absorbed the blow easily and countered with an elbow to his jaw, knocking him back a few steps as his teeth clicked hard together. And just like that, they were wrestling in the sand like kids again, their gales of laughter making it hard to keep the upper hand.

Soulmate games...an absolutely absurd move from his second-in-command. An outdated, archaic, usually deeply dangerous tradition, frowned on by the vast majority of civilized wolves. Holding such an event would only confirm his reputation among the other Alphas as a reckless adrenaline junkie who only cared about glory and acclaim. But if he refused to go along with the event, he'd have to publicly acknowledge that his second-in-command had overstepped his authority, which would unforgivably weaken his position as Alpha in the eyes of his pack—not to mention disappoint the women who'd agreed to come to Kurivon in the hopes of winning his heart. He didn't even want to start thinking about what a disaster that was going to be. Torren had pledged his heart to adventure long ago; there wasn't a woman alive who could turn him around on that front, no matter how well she competed. Baltar had offered half a dozen strangers a prize that couldn't exist.

In the short hour since he'd arrived here on Kurivon, Baltar had turned his entire life upside down, and filled his already dangerous future with far more problems than he wanted or needed.

Torren couldn't remember the last time he'd been this happy.

Chapter 2 - Lethie

Paws. Four of them. That was where her consciousness first settled as she rose, unwillingly as always, from the half-numb fugue state that was the closest thing in her world to comfort. There was no sleeping for her, not any longer, but she'd been strengthening the ability to disassociate herself from what was happening to her. The deeper she sank into that fugue state, the less objectionably the time would pass. The trick, of course, was resisting the temptation to rouse in response to the constant battery of shocks and insults her ever-shifting, ever-warping body harbored. For a while, in the early days of her corruption, she'd tried to pay attention, to maintain a kind of awareness of what was happening to the body she'd once called home. But that attention only brought her suffering, and because suffering was what they fed on, some vestige of old instinct told her to stop trying. She allowed herself to lose track of the edges of her body, of its ever-changing limb count...the waxing and waning of strength, the ever-fluctuating ability to mobilize the hulking carcass in which her spirit still dwelt. These days, she haunted her body instead of inhabiting it, watching from a strange distance as it shambled around its island home.

There was no question of going back, she knew that much. The world in which she'd been in command of her shape, the days when she'd chosen between two bodies that were home to her, that world might as well have been a dream.

Perhaps it was the cruelty, then, that drew her from her carefully cultivated trance. The cruelty of allowing her a return to some semblance of what she'd once been, the familiarity anchored first in the sensation of her four paws pressing into the soil beneath them, gently displacing it with the weight of her body. Familiar weight, she found herself reluctantly noticing. Memory was an even more powerful enemy than full consciousness, and it tangled itself around her now, taunting her with recollection of the days when she'd run through the

woods of home with paws like these thudding against untainted soil. Four paws, four legs, thick fur—before she could stop herself, she shifted her weight from side to side, assessing her frame. Her jaws opened and closed at her command, no jagged snarl of teeth jutting from impossibly numerous mouths, no ooze of acidic blood, no distorted feedback from too many eyes embedded in a monstrous frame...

Before she could rein the thought in, she felt it come to life in her mind, imbued with a preposterous hope she'd thought beyond her capabilities. This was her old body, she thought—then recoiled in horror, burning with the expectation of punishment. Nothing more painful than the extinguishing of hope...and nothing more delicious to the demons who were her masters. Her muscles twitched and trembled as she braced herself, eyes squeezed shut, panting slightly with the effort... a warm breeze brushed through her fur, the distant call of a bird sailing above the dull, constant roar of the ocean.

And Lethie came to the understanding that, at least for now, she was a wolf again. Or at least a reasonable facsimile of one.

There was no room for relief, no thought of pleasure at being returned to the body she'd once called home. Gazing warily around her, she set off walking, unwilling to stay in one place for too long. It had been a long time since she'd paid any particular attention to the island, but from what she could gather, nothing much had changed. Thick jungle pressed in around her, the air warm and wet with humidity, the sky visible through the canopy of trees above a bright, rich, glaring blue. She tasted the air, jaws dropping open to let her tongue loll from her mouth. Thick with demonic taint, this air. She knew that, somehow, though she couldn't—or wouldn't—remember the taste of untainted air for comparison.

Why was she wolf-shaped again? There had been no change to the corruption at her heart—she could feel the sickly thud of that diseased muscle with every step, a constant reminder of the choice she'd made. The choice to live, she

thought. It wasn't a memory she associated any particular emotion with. Simply something that was true, like gravity, or the rise and fall of the tides. Once, she could have chosen death. Once, she hadn't. Regret wasn't a concept that came into play, really. Did she regret sunrise? Did she regret rainfall?

Lethie did soon find a reason to think of that day again, though. It had been the last time she'd been granted an audience with her demonic masters. And it wasn't long before the thud of her poisoned heart began to draw her inexorably toward the dark of the nearest cave. No sense resisting a call so clear. Rochmar was riddled with caves, an intricate and interconnected system that hosted its most powerful residents. Once, a long time ago, she'd called them the Archdemons. She'd conceptualized them as distinct entities, beings with individual minds, motivations, personalities and drives...she'd even wondered, in a particularly egregious flight of fantasy, whether they might be turned against one another. She'd been a fool, and it had been part of her undoing. Could you turn an enemy's thumb against his elbow? Convince his eye that his liver was his enemy?

The descent through the caves was treacherous, the darkness quickly turning absolute, but with the call of her master in her ears, Lethie didn't need sight to guide her. Soon the passageway was opening up, giving way to one of the thousands of chambers embedded in the thick volcanic rock that formed the island. In absolute darkness, she came before them. In absolute darkness, she sensed their regard, their scrutiny of her. She knew their contempt, she knew their hatred, she knew their cruelty and she knew their mirth at her confusion. And though their speech did not take any form a wolf could recognize, the rot at her heart translated their words as clearly as if they'd been spoken in her mother tongue.

“At last we have a use for you.”

There was no sense replying. She'd long since given up any hope that there was anything in her mind inaccessible to them. What use was it to speak?

“More wolves are making an attempt on our island.” There was hatred in what passed for a voice, but a strange eagerness too. Her master was pleased by this news, in some strange way. Did they relish a challenge? She knew how pointless it was to speculate, but the old habit rose up in her regardless. Curiosity was an even harder habit to break than hope. “They will come. They will fight. They will try to purge us. They will fail.”

It was always hard to tell if one or many demons were speaking, or whether that kind of distinction made any sense. Lethie waited, trying not to let hope—her worst habit—kindle yet more curiosity in her mind. Was it true, what they told her? Or was this just a new method they’d devised to torment her? Did demons get bored? It had been a long, long time since they’d had any opposition to their presence here...

“You will help,” came the instruction, surprising her. “Your body, returned. Your mind, your own.” Something like a laugh, in the darkness. “It doesn’t believe, it doesn’t trust. What cause would we have to release you? Clever, clever. Think this way, wolf. You are our only plaything. But we have grown so bored, so very bored with you.”

Strange, what echoes of her old self remained, even now. She almost felt affronted that they had grown tired of tormenting her.

“This is a new game,” her masters continued. “You will go among them, and you will do our work. You will spread our word. You will foment, you will corrupt. You will bring us so many new playthings, fresh new spirits to break, that we will have no further interest in you. You have always yearned to live out your days alone, untroubled. This meager span and woeful death, we will grant, if you please us.”

She was dismissed. It had been so long since she’d let herself think that her mind felt like a rusted machine whirring to life, impossibly clumsy and stupid. Her paws were carrying her out of the cave, the thick, sulfurous burn of demonic taint lessening only slightly as she moved away from the island’s

center of corruption. She had been given a mission, she understood that much. That was no new development. Her master's word was law to her, and had been since she made the choice to serve rather than face death. But why bother hauling her down for an audience? And, more importantly, what lay behind the offer of *payment*? Of exchange? Her master had spoken the truth about the life she'd always longed for—solitude and peace, an uninhabited island on which to live out the rest of her days. Impossible, of course. She might as well have wished to sleep among the stars.

But why offer a reward at all, when they knew as well as she did that her master's will bound her body and soul? A cruel trick, that was the most likely possibility—some new gambit designed to wring more misery out of her. It seemed true that they were growing tired of toying with her...there was a limit to how much one soul could suffer, and it seemed like they were reaching it with her. Was it possible that her master had spoken the truth? That they would willingly give her up if it meant a few fresh victims to toy with instead?

Lethie emerged blinking into the sunlight, her mind racing with more thoughts than she'd allowed herself to have in the last several months combined. They'd given her back her body, untainted, unwarped—she could feel the familiar buzz of magic beneath her skin, the power of a shifter she'd thought had been lost to her. And they'd set her the task of infiltrating the pack that would be arriving on the island. Her masters could easily have taken direct control of her frame, puppeted her, possessed her, but it wasn't her body alone that they needed to fool the newcomers, was it? It was her. These demons lacked the creativity, the inventiveness required to deceive wolves for long.

They needed her to play along willingly. And that meant giving her a little of her freedom back.

The first step was to manage her expectations. She lay in the dust by the mouth of the cave, sun beating down on her fur, mind racing faster and faster as the habit returned. She couldn't allow herself to believe she had any real power, here.

Every rotten thud of her heart told her that no matter what her body might look like, her corruption was still absolute. She belonged to her master as much as she ever had, and her control over her body could be revoked at any time. Nor could she allow herself to believe, even for a moment, that the demons could be trusted to carry through with their promise to give her the peace she dreamed of.

But maybe—just maybe—providing her masters with new wolves to play with would reduce a little of their attention on her. That was something worth working toward. Hell, maybe they *would* keep their promise, if they were as bored with her as they claimed. There were half a dozen tiny islands off the coast of Rochmar to which they could exile her, banishing her from their sight. She wouldn't get her hopes up, she told herself firmly. But there was no question in her mind that the correct course of action was to commit herself to the mission she'd been set with as much fervor and dedication as she still possessed. Once, a long time ago, she'd been a formidable woman.

Perhaps some useful scraps of that old self could still be repurposed.

The newcomers landed early the next morning. There had been no question of where to wait for them—Rochmar's entire perimeter was dominated by jagged, unfriendly cliff faces, with the singular exception of a narrow sandy beach on its easternmost edge. She watched, well-hidden in the trees, as half a dozen wolves brought their groaning little boats ashore, dragging them up the sand far enough to steady them before setting up camp. What struck her first about them was how young they were. Had she been that young, when she'd first come here in boats not unlike those? Had she laughed like that at the antics of her packmates, tossing her hair back over her shoulder as she paused in her work to joke with her fellows?

She forced herself to focus. She wasn't here to reminisce, she was here to figure out how she was going to infiltrate this pack. They had to be seasoned demon hunters—there was simply no other kind of wolf who'd be foolhardy

enough to set up camp in a place like Rochmar. She couldn't just walk out of the woods and join them at their campfire, they'd kill her on sight. She had to be a lot smarter than that if she was going to succeed...and she had to hope like hell that there wasn't a lorekeeper among their number. It would be hard enough to hide what she truly was from experienced demon hunters. A lorekeeper's magic sight would mean game over.

There was a tall man among them with a mane of dark hair, its silver streaks marking him as a little older than the rest; from the way the others deferred to him she gleaned he ranked highly, though from their conversation, she knew the pack's Alpha wasn't with them. Understandable, to send a vanguard ahead to establish a base and set up a rudimentary camp...though she frowned a little at what had been brought. A dozen tents, that made sense. A firepit was being dug, and supplies and equipment laid out beside it...but why were two of the wolves busying themselves with the construction of some kind of podium at one end of the beach?

Lethie couldn't help creeping closer. Reckless, maybe, to risk the mission at such an early stage, but she wanted to hear more of their conversation.

“—heard the other Alphas are furious,” one of the pair was saying, a young woman who carried herself with the unconscious grace of a warrior. There was a blade at her belt, and though her bearing was casual, her fingers were never far from its hilt. “It took Alpha Torren months to convince them to let us settle Rochmar in the first place, and they didn't anticipate something like this in the mix.”

“The Alpha doesn't take ‘no’ for an answer,” her companion chuckled. “Ask forgiveness, not permission, that's the only way to play it. Not that he cares much about either.”

“Do you think he'll go through with it?” the young woman pressed. “I mean—Soulmate Games. It's kind of a joke, right? That's not how soulmates work.”

“It’s just an excuse to have some fun,” the man said with a shrug of his broad shoulders. He had a longsword strapped across his back, and she didn’t miss the way his silver eyes kept darting to the treeline. Casual as their conversation was, these were wolves who knew to keep a sharp eye on their surroundings. The familiarity of it made her chest ache, but Lethie forced herself to focus.

“And a bit of an ego trip, I think,” the young woman mused. “What man wouldn’t want a bunch of hot women fighting tooth and nail to be his soulmate?”

“Me,” the man said promptly, winning a grin from his companion.

“Correct answer, well done.”

“It’s a show of strength, too, I think.” The young man had slipped an arm around the young woman’s shoulders, drawing her against his side with an easy familiarity that nevertheless seemed to crackle with magic. It had been a long time since Lethie had seen the soulmate bond in action. She did what she could not to think about it, about what her demonic overlords would do to these young lovers. “We need numbers if we’re going to succeed here, and these women—whatever you think about their decision to compete—must be tough as hell, or Baltar never would’ve brought them with us. The Games will be a good way to welcome them to the pack, and to see what they’re made of.”

“I guess you’re right.” The young woman smiled up at her mate. “Glad I didn’t have to fight for you.”

“Scared of a challenge?”

“Scared for anyone who’d be dumb enough to go up against me,” she retorted. “Hope things don’t get too nasty. Competition’s all well and good, but we should avoid any serious injuries in case we need to defend ourselves at short notice. These demons are going to be *serious*. I don’t think I’ve ever felt taint this thick.” A sudden grin slashed across her face, bright as the sun. “Can’t wait to get stick it into them.”

Lethie had heard enough. She slipped away from the pair, doing her best to ignore the seething ache in the pit of her stomach, focusing instead on what she'd learned from their brief conversation. Soulmate Games. It rang a distant bell in the part of her memory where she preferred not to spend much time—in another life, she might even have had an opinion about the merits of such a practice. Right now, the only thing she was allowing herself to feel was triumphant. Because from the way those wolves had been talking, this was the perfect way for her to join the pack without suspicion. Half a dozen women would be competing with one another for a place at the Alpha's side—half a dozen strangers, not only to each other, but to the pack, too. All she needed to do was to devise a cover story, add herself to the ranks of the newcomers, and rely on the general atmosphere of the Games to cover any strangeness they detected. It would give her an opportunity to access the Alpha, too. That would be of great strategic value. She'd taken careful note, too, of the way the young wolves' brief exchange had characterized their leader. Reckless, daring, arrogant... these were qualities that demons always jumped to exploit.

A long time ago, the woman that Lethie had been would have burned with shame and rage at the way she was thinking. Working on the side of wolfkind's ancient enemy. Using their tactics to help destroy a pack of fierce young warriors like the ones she'd once fought beside. Undermining a cause she'd once sworn her life to defend.

But the only thing Lethie still shared with that woman was her name.

Chapter 3 - Torren

Not for the first time that week, Torren found himself wondering if all of this was some kind of fever dream. The curious sense of unreality had pervaded the last seven days, ever since Baltar had arrived unexpectedly early and dropped the Soulmate Games on him like a brick. Once his initial shock had cleared, he'd almost started to like the idea. His ego was thrilled by the idea that so many women were interested in him, and it had been a long, long time since he'd enjoyed that kind of female company...since before he'd come to Kurivon, in fact.

But then, of course, he'd made the of mentioning it to the other Alphas.

They'd been furious, every one of them. Even Blaine, his only remaining fellow bachelor, who he'd come to think of as an ally, had been stony-faced while the whole Council took turns shouting at Torren. Some of them objected to the Soulmate Games on principle, calling it antiquated and asinine. Belmont went so far as to call it an insult to the soulmate bond, his usually ice-cold demeanor visibly disturbed. Others had restricted their comments to how reckless it was to host what was basically an athletic competition on an island that teemed so thickly with demons that no wolf had set foot there since Kurivon's previous settlement had met its tragic end. He was risking the lives of his pack, risking the lives of the competitors, risking the mission itself—all in the service of his own ego.

But what choice did he have? His whole pack knew about the games and by all accounts were looking forward to them. The contestants were chosen and ready for the fray. He couldn't back down now, could he? So he'd weathered the storm, unapologetic, drawing on his own authority as Alpha to insist that it was none of the Council's business how he and his pack chose to celebrate their arrival at their new home. The

meeting ended in an uneasy stalemate, and Torren knew that he'd burned more than a few diplomatic bridges here...but at the end of the day, the other Alphas couldn't control what he and his pack did on Rochmar. It was pretty clear, however, that the Soulmate Games wouldn't be drawing an audience from the other packs.

Probably for the best, Torren had thought as he left the meeting, feeling oddly like a child who'd just been scolded for straying too far from the campfire. He trusted his wolves to keep their wits about them on Rochmar, but he couldn't say the same for the residents of Kurivon. Being around Baltar again had made it very clear just how lazy they'd all gotten here. A bit of daring and danger was exactly what they needed to clear their heads and reshuffle their priorities—and if they couldn't see that, well, that was none of his business.

And so he'd packed up his belongings and left Kurivon Island for his new home on Rochmar. His pack had already made camp by the time he'd arrived, a small group having gone on ahead with Baltar to supervise, but any attempt at maintaining his dignified, aloof Alpha status was quickly dashed when all ten of them came hurtling down the beach, wolf-shaped, to tackle him to the sand in ebullient greeting. It had been all he could do to shift into his own wolf form before he was knocked down—had he remained on two legs, he likely would have been crushed to death.

And that was only the start of the reunion. Baltar, it seemed, had been hard at work getting the Soulmate Games organized. While Torren had been taking a sound scolding from every other Alpha in the archipelago, Baltar had been planning out the Games. And Torren had no sooner arrived on the island of Rochmar than the first event was announced. After a few minutes of reunion with his wolves, he was ushered quickly to a stone platform that had been constructed at one end of the beach, elevated above the sand and decorated, hastily, with flags. His pack were warriors, not artists, but he couldn't help but smile at the effort they'd made.

“Are you ready, Alpha?” Baltar, grinning like a lunatic, was standing by his side with his hands behind his back like some parody of a servant. “To meet the women who will compete to win your heart?”

A melodramatic murmuring went up among his wolves, and he wondered—not for the first time—if all of this might not be some extended practical joke at his expense. But he was so happy to see them all after such a long separation, so desperately relieved that something interesting was finally happening, that he could only conclude that if it was a joke, he might as well play along. And so, with a dramatic, flourishing little bow that won an appreciative laugh from the pack, he raised his voice to be heard over the wash of the waves on the shore behind them.

“Let me first say a few words, as Alpha of this world’s newest and most fearsome wolf pack.” His wolves roared agreement, throwing their heads back to howl at the sky—always a comical gesture in their two-legged bodies, their human voices unsuited for the task. “These contestants are competing for a prize more valuable than they could imagine—and I’m not just talking about my attention.” A murmur of laughter at that. “This pack—our pack—is not like any other. Members of our elite organization have fought hard for that privilege. Each wolf who stands before me today is a warrior who has excelled far beyond the ordinary scope. Each wolf who claims a place in this pack knows it for the badge of honor that it is. And these contestants know that, too...at least, I hope they do,” he added, shooting a sharp glance over his shoulder at Baltar. “They will compete in these trials not just to prove themselves worthy of my interest—no easy feat, as many broken-hearted young women can attest—but to prove themselves worthy of this pack.” He took a moment to take in his pack, the smiles on their faces, the mixture of amusement and solemnity that his half-joking speech had roused in them. “They are here to win your hearts as well as mine. And if they prove themselves strong enough—and lucky enough—to survive these trials, their real prize is membership to this pack,

this elite guild of warriors, and the opportunity to help us purge this cursed rock of demons once and for all.”

“I’d drink to that,” Baltar said, clapping him on the shoulder as the pack’s ragged cheers lifted above the roar of the sea. “And I will—once the first trial is complete. Competitors!”

Baltar’s voice echoed down the beach. An expectant hush fell over the pack as a large tent at the far end of the camp was unzipped. Torren hadn’t realized that the competitors were already here, or he might have chosen his words about them with a little more care. Had they heard his speech, he wondered? Hiding his unease, he folded his arms across his chest, every bit the picture of the imposing Alpha as the competitors approached. At some signal from Baltar, his pack had dropped back to take seats around the stone platform on which he was seated, forming a kind of audience for the women as they approached.

Baltar hadn’t been exaggerating when he said they were warriors. Each one of the women who stood before him now looked strong enough to move mountains with their bare hands, and they were dressed for battle. A few carried weapons at their hips or on their backs, a few were unarmed, but from the way they were all looking at him, he knew he was being sized up. Well, he’d never had any problems in that department. Was it vanity to know you were a good-looking man, he wondered? It wasn’t as though it was hard to notice the effect he had on women. His rather unique shock of white-blond hair, his muscular frame, his carefully maintained peak physical condition...all of it meant that he’d certainly never found it hard to walk into a new town and get himself in trouble with the ladies. It felt a little strange to be studied so openly by so many women at once, of course—especially with his pack watching on—but it wasn’t an unfamiliar feeling, and it certainly wasn’t unpleasant. Especially not when he saw a couple of them nodding in approval, and a few half-hidden smiles.

But not, he couldn't help but notice, from the woman at the end of the line. Baltar had stepped forward and was addressing the group, but Torren felt himself tuning out of whatever his friend was saying, zeroing in instead on the competitor who didn't quite seem to fit the profile. These women were warriors of great renown; each one of them seemed to vibrate with vitality, their powerful bodies glowing with health, hard muscle packed beneath their skin. But the woman at the end...there was something gaunt about her, something brittle, like a person who was just emerging from the effects of a wasting illness. Baltar was introducing the contestants one by one, and Torren reluctantly returned his attention to his second-in-command, nodding and smiling and immediately forgetting each name as it was spoken. The contestants all beamed when he looked at them—the tallest of them even winked when she was introduced, her smile wicked and tempting.

“And finally, this is—Lethie,” Baltar said, and Torren noticed the fractional pause before he said her name. What did that mean, he wondered? One of the other contestants glanced down the line at Lethie, a subtle frown on her pretty face. Torren's curiosity only grew when he met the woman's eyes, waiting for a smile that simply failed to materialize. Instead, she held his gaze like an enemy soldier sizing him up on the battlefield, only offering him a curt nod before returning her eyes to the sea beyond him. Baltar didn't elaborate on the woman's history the way he had with the others, but before Torren could question him further, he was announcing the first of the trials.

“According to tradition, the first trial of the Games ought to be the simplest,” Baltar proclaimed. “We love tradition. We're a deeply traditional pack.” A murmur of laughter went up at that, echoed by the competitors...but not, Torren noticed, by the woman at the end, whose gaze was still fixed on the horizon as though she were a thousand miles away from any of this. “And so the first Trial will be a simple

race. The first wolf to run a complete lap of Rochmar Island and return to us here on the beach is the winner. Easy!”

Torren couldn't help but chuckle along with his pack. It was no secret that, save for the sandy beach upon which they were currently standing, Rochmar's perimeter was anything but simple to traverse. Thick, unwieldy vegetation, jagged cliffs and sharp rocks underfoot, a forebodingly steep peak at its center...not to mention the demonic presence that could mean an instant, awful death for any unwary traveler. He saw a few of the women nod grimly to one another as though they'd been expecting this, one reaching down to pull a long, jagged blade from her belt. He stopped himself from glancing yet again at Lethie, who didn't seem to have reacted to the news at all.

The contestants lined up, and Torren rose once again to his feet to begin the race, feeling a brief flicker of unease as he remembered the dire warnings with which the other Alphas had left him. Rochmar was a deeply dangerous place. Even here on the beach, the demonic taint in the air was oppressively thick. Running a lap of the island was far from a simple fitness challenge—it would be a small miracle to get around without getting into at least a few skirmishes with the island's powerful demons. But one look at the determined faces of the contestants told him that they knew exactly what they were here for, and he wasn't going to insult them by offering a warning that anyone with half a brain would take as given.

“Good hunting,” was all he said, hoping the cocksure grin on his face looked effortless and sincere. “Don't get yourselves killed.” He dropped his hand, and just like that, the women were off. Half of them shifted immediately, great paws churning up the sand as they sprinted up the beach towards the treeline. Others ran in their human forms—he saw the blonde with the machete dart into the trees and quickly disappear. Too late, he remembered the strange woman with the faraway stare and scanned the beach for her, wondering what strategy she'd opted for, but she was already gone.

“How will you know they haven’t cheated?” he asked Baltar in an undertone. “If it was me, I’d cut across the middle of the island.”

“More power to ‘em if they can manage that,” Baltar chuckled. “It’d be ten times harder to get over that peak than it would to get through the trees. Besides, it’s not about speed. It’s about getting past the demons in the jungle in one piece.”

“Right,” Torren said faintly. “Listen, how dangerous are these tasks going to get, exactly?”

Baltar chuckled. “That’s for me to know and you to find out. Now! While we wait for the contestants to return, we’ve got a party to set up. We’ve got some catching up to do with our absent Alpha, I think!” A roar of agreement rose up from his pack, and what could Torren do but join the celebrations? There was a table of food and drink set up on the beach, and a lot of people he hadn’t seen in years to catch up with. It was almost enough to take his mind off the life-or-death journey being taken by seven women he’d just met.

It had been mid-afternoon when the contestants headed off on their race around the island, and it was dusk when the first one returned, breaking through the treeline at the other end of the beach to a chorus of cheers from the waiting pack. To everyone’s shock, and Torren’s most of all, it was Lethie who’d made it back first. The crowd dropped back as Torren approached her, his curiosity back in full force. Up close, he was able to get a better look at her. Her dark hair wasn’t black, as he’d assumed; it was dark brown and fell to about her shoulders, but it was hopelessly matted, tangled with twigs and leaves. Was the trip around the island to blame? She seemed otherwise unhurt, save for a few superficial scrapes and bruises, but when he went to put a congratulatory hand on her shoulder, she flinched so violently he worried for a moment he’d put pressure on a broken bone.

“Congratulations,” he said, hoping in vain that he could at least extract a smile from her. Her narrow, pointed face was stony and unresponsive, those dull silver eyes resting

on his face for only a few heartbeats before sliding away. “You did well to make it back so fast—and without a scratch on you.” His pack, clearly uneasy, attempted a round of applause, but Lethie’s grim expression didn’t change, and it quickly died out.

Thankfully, the tense moment was broken by a ragged whoop of triumph, and two more of the competitors came stumbling out of the trees, arm in arm. The pack’s attention was quickly diverted by the breathless tale the pair told—Roda, ambushed a few hundred paces from the end of the race, had been pinned down by demons and fearing for her life before Virien had stumbled upon the scene and leapt to her defense. Both were unhurt, to his relief.

The ebullient mood continued through the evening as the rest of the competitors emerged one by one, each with a story to tell of their eventful lap of the island. Smooth as anything, the competitors joined the party on the beach, and as the evening gave way to night, Torren had to hand it to his second-in-command—he couldn’t imagine a better way to integrate a handful of new members into the pack. In a few short hours, these women had proven themselves to be brave enough to run a lap of a demon-infested island, strong enough to survive it, and reckless enough to do it for a downright ridiculous reason. They were in the company of perhaps the only wolves in the world who were mad enough to find that kind of behavior appealing.

And now they were all getting drunk together. He couldn’t imagine a better way of finding himself a mate...that was, of course, if he was the kind of guy who was interested in that kind of thing. No doubt there would be an awkward conversation in his future with the eventual winner of the Games. But that was a problem for later. Right now, he was going to focus on the considerable delights available here and now...like basking in the attention of the gorgeous warrior women who were all vying for his attention, with varying degrees of subtlety. Roda was cute, he noticed—her bob of sandy brown hair framed a face sprinkled with freckles, and

she had an easy, charming laugh. Tuise, the dark-haired woman with the broadsword, drew his eye, too. She'd finished the race in last place, but the smile on her face as she cleaned fresh demon blood from her blade told him that she'd had other priorities out there.

But for some reason, he kept finding himself scanning the crowd for the race's winner. Lethie haunted the edges of the party like a ghost for a little while, but he quickly gave up on trying to extract any kind of conversation from her. The chilling effect of her fixed, grim expression and her thousand-mile stare weren't alleviated at all when she finally spoke; her voice rasped like rough stone, and she gave such wooden one-word answers to his questions that he quickly gave up. From the looks she was getting from the other competitors, he had a feeling he wasn't the only one who was struggling to make a connection.

"She's a recent addition," Baltar told him when he asked, shrugging his shoulders. "Didn't tell me much about herself, but she knocked me on my ass when we sparred, so I figured that was good enough."

It was, Torren thought, quietly adjusting his assessment of the brittle woman with the matted hair. Baltar had spoken lightly, but the only wolf who'd beaten him in a sparring match in the decade he'd known him was Torren himself. No wonder he'd added her to the competition without further questioning. What more was there to know? Torren headed back into the crowd, dodging an inviting wave from Virien... but Lethie was nowhere to be seen.

Damnit, he thought crossly. She must have gone to bed early. It would have been funny if it wasn't so aggravating. The other competitors were falling over themselves to talk to him, but the one woman he actually wanted to spend some time with seemed like she'd prefer to be somewhere else—anywhere else. What was her deal, exactly? Why had she even entered this competition if she didn't want to talk to him? There was either something deeply wrong with her...or she

was some kind of mastermind, playing hard to get on a whole new level.

But whatever it was, Torren was already unbearably impatient to find out more about her.

Chapter 4 - Lethie

The relief Lethie felt when she slipped away from the party was unlike anything that she'd felt before. She stepped carefully into the empty tent she'd be sharing with the other competitors for the next few weeks, grimacing as she picked her way over their discarded belongings and found her own cot. If anyone asked, she'd say she'd been tired from the race and had turned in early. That was believable, wasn't it? Lethie pulled the blanket over her face and sought refuge in the darkness, her whole body vibrating with the shock of a sudden and almost overwhelming immersion in a world she'd thought she'd left behind for good.

At least it hadn't been a total disaster, she told herself, repeating it a few hundred times until she found herself almost beginning to believe it. The first stage of her infiltration of the pack...well, nobody could say that it had gone well, but it hadn't gone terribly. She hadn't blown her cover, at least—if only because she'd been acting too strangely for anyone to suspect that she was a demon.

It had been the trip to Kurivon that had unsettled her. She'd realized that morning that the competitors in the Soulmate Games were coming through the portal together, and that Baltar would be there to meet them. That meant she had to be there, too, or they'd realize she hadn't come from Halforst. It had been tricky enough to get to Kurivon undetected—a long, cold swim in the dead of night, then hiding herself in the trees until the portal had come to life. She'd waited for all six of them to arrive, then followed them as they headed down to the docks to catch a boat to Rochmar—where she'd caught Baltar's arm and introduced herself, in a voice that rasped and creaked with horrific disuse, as a hopeful contestant in the Games.

She'd imagined she'd need to prove herself somehow. But she hadn't been expecting him to challenge her to a

sparring match right then and there. The other contestants had watched from the dock, clearly annoyed to be met with yet more competition; in their place, she supposed, she would have been hoping for the newcomer to be soundly beaten. But Lethie had no intention of letting that happen. Baltar was a powerful fighter, but when she looked at him, his weaknesses lit up like glowing embers in her vision. His arrogance, his recklessness, his rashness, the moments he was distracted—just a little—by the knowledge that several beautiful women were looking at him. A few short minutes had been all it took to disarm him and hold his own blade against his throat.

The boat trip was tense and awkward—for Lethie, at least. The other women chatted easily amongst themselves, and she overheard enough to learn that they were more or less strangers to one another, too. It should have been easy for her to slip in among them, to talk and laugh and endear herself to them...but the uneasy way they looked at her stilled her voice in her throat and made her burn with an intense self-consciousness. By the time they reached Rochmar, the foreboding volcanic peak cut out against the bright blue sky, Lethie was so paralyzed by social unease she could hardly bring herself to follow the group up to the tent they'd all be sharing for the duration of the games.

Enough of her training remained to her, at least, to commit some relevant information to memory. These women were all demon hunters from Halforst, powerful and experienced...and their competitive spirits burned in them like torches. Lethie could tell that most of them had already dismissed her as competition, and a quick glance in a mirror told her why. The face that looked back may as well have belonged to a stranger. Her hair was matted and wild, her eyes dull, her face hollow...a thrill of shame went through her like lightning. Did she really expect to win the Alpha's interest, looking like this?

She burned with an embarrassment that almost immobilized her when the group was presented to the Alpha for the first time. The women she stood with shone like

precious gems, and there she stood, like a jagged, filthy rock. She could hardly bring herself to look at the Alpha when her name was called—she was too acutely aware of the thudding of her poisoned heart in her ears. It was a relief when the race began. Her terror carried her into the trees faster than she'd ever moved in her life, and she was halfway around the island before her pulse had begun to settle.

Right, she had thought. A new tactic was required here. She wasn't going to be able to catch the Alpha's eye with her beauty or her charm. That meant she needed to *win*. And thankfully, she had a few tricks up her sleeve that the other contestants didn't. As she ran, she let her feet drum hard against the ground, letting the taint in her heart reach down into the corrupted soil to awaken her fellow demons. They'd relish the opportunity to slow her competitors down.

Sure enough, she was the first to emerge from the trees. The pack surrounded her, congratulating her on her victory, the Alpha among them. She forced herself to meet his gaze, to make an assessment. To corrupt the pack, she reminded herself, she needed to corrupt the Alpha. And one look into his silver eyes told her how easy that would be. She could see his arrogance, lighting him up from within. His ego, his burning need to be admired, to be fawned over. And in that moment, she realized that she'd unwittingly chosen the perfect tactic to draw him in.

Men like him needed to be adored. All she had to do was withhold the admiration he desired, and he'd be putty in her hands.

It had worked, she realized now, lying there with the blanket wrapped tightly around her as the dull sound of the party continued outside. She had remained cold and awkward during the celebrations—it took little effort, given how uncomfortable she felt among these wolves. She'd lost count of how many times the Alpha's eyes sought her out, how many casual glances he threw her way even as the other contestants tried with increasing boldness to trap him in conversation. Leaving early had been a necessity, given how overwhelmed

she'd felt, but it had also been the right move. If she'd read Torren right—and she was sure that she had—he'd spend the rest of the night consumed by curiosity about her.

The other women were whispering about her when they came into the tent later that night. She pretended to be asleep and listened as closely as she could; much of their whispered conversation was inaudible, but she overheard Virien telling Roda that the Alpha had been asking after her. The glow of triumph in her chest was shocking in its warmth. How long had it been since she'd felt a sense of achievement? The sleep that claimed her was uneasy as always, fraught with familiar nightmares, but when she woke at dawn she was rested and ready for the second trial.

“Last night, we challenged your speed! Today, you will prove your endurance.”

The Alpha's second-in-command, Baltar, was clearly enjoying his role as Master of Games. Lethie stood aloof from the rest of the group, feeling their curious stares on her back. Their curiosity would soon turn to resentment—and that was something she and her masters could use against them. But it was Torren's attention she was really focused on. The Alpha was seated on the podium again, the early morning light making his pale hair shine. Vanity oozed from him. She could see the careful way he'd angled himself to make the most of the morning light, the way his shirt, so casually unbuttoned, revealed a hint of the muscle of his chest. She felt a sudden itching in her palms at the thought of sparring with him, knocking him into the sand, trouncing him the way she'd trounced his second in command...

She'd been looking at him too long, she realized, and forced her gaze back to Baltar. The challenge was simple enough—they were to climb to the highest point of Rochmar Island, and bring back a piece of volcanic stone to prove they'd reached the peak. Torren dropped his hand once again to signal the beginning of the trial, and Lethie ran for the treeline with the other contestants. But something made her linger for a moment—long enough to realize that three of the

contestants were walking together. Roda, the girl with the freckles, Ditha, with the close-cropped black hair and a curved knife at each hip, and Azur, a sweet woman whose thick, curly hair was already escaping its tight braids in the humidity. They regarded her with a mixture of suspicion and curiosity, and Lethie readied herself to slip away from them. It was Ditha who spoke, her voice sharp but not unfriendly.

“You can travel with us. Safer in numbers, and easier to reach the peak if we help each other.”

“It’s still a race,” Roda was quick to point out. “But we’ll worry about that on the way down.”

Lethie was torn, for a moment. She knew she had to keep winning these events if she was going to maintain Torren’s curiosity, and she’d travel a lot faster on her own. But at the same time, this was a valuable opportunity to learn a little more about her competitors—and to sew a little discord, if the opportunity arose. So she nodded, not trusting herself to try for a smile (earlier practices in the mirror had been downright frightening), and fell into step with her fellow contestants.

It was too easy to steer them the wrong way, helping them chart a path that would take them a much longer and more difficult way up the mountainside than was necessary. It took a little longer for an opportunity to arise to set them against each other. It was clear that they were determined to at least pretend to get on well, but Lethie was nothing if not patient, and the rot at her heart could always point her in the direction of discontent. Roda’s sore spot was her youth, and when the conversation turned to experience, it wasn’t hard to get her seething with insecurity. Ditha had once been betrayed by someone she’d trusted—an old wound, but one that glowed with heat when Lethie asked about what they’d do if they could only find one piece of volcanic rock at the mountain’s peak. Azur, misreading the situation, joked that she’d simply grab it and run, which saw Ditha lapse into a brooding silence. All it took was a few minutes in that uneasy quiet before Azur’s insecurities were burning, too. She was the kind of

loud young woman who compensated for her true lack of self-confidence by putting on a show of arrogance, but that was a brittle shield, and one far too easily dashed to pieces.

Sure enough, by the time they were a quarter of the way up the mountain, the women were arguing fiercely. Lethie slipped away unseen, their rising voices following her into the depths of the jungle, and satisfaction hummed in her corrupted heart like a song.

Reaching the top of the mountain was child's play to a wolf who could navigate the cave system in the dark, and it wasn't long before Lethie was picking her careful way along a path close to the peak. She'd opted for her human shape, as it was lighter and less likely to knock the path out from beneath her, but the showers of pebbles with each step still made her uneasy. From this high, the island spread strangely out beneath her—an unusual perspective of the place that had been her prison all these years. For just a moment, she let her eyes stray to the tiny islands in the surf around Rochmar. Would her demonic masters really let her live out her days on one of those, alone? She wanted so badly to let herself believe it...if only because it would help ease a little of the shame she was trying not to feel at what she was doing here.

“Beat me again, huh?”

The suddenness of the voice nearly made her lose her balance. Lethie whipped around, shocked to see that she wasn't alone up here. The other wolf was standing with her arms folded, a chunk of volcanic rock gripped loosely in one fist, and Lethie recognized the tall blonde woman whom she'd only narrowly beaten in the foot race yesterday. They regarded each other for a moment, and Lethie didn't miss the hard, calculating look on Virien's face.

“You did well,” she offered, her voice still an uncomfortable rasp in her throat. “A hard climb, alone.”

“You too,” Virien said, lifting an eyebrow. “What happened to the other three?”

Lethie thought better of lying. “They argued. I left.”

She’d played it right. Virien huffed appreciative laughter. “Fair. A race is a race.”

“Speaking of...” Lethie stooped to pick up a chunk of volcanic rock from the path, its coarse surface rough against her fingers. Virien’s eyes hadn’t left her face.

“You know this island,” she said. It wasn’t a question. “You’re slower than me, but you beat me yesterday, and you got up here the same time I did.”

Had she worked it out? Had she seen the demonic taint at Lethie’s core? She braced herself for the accusation, but Virien’s face held curiosity, not revulsion. She was insightful, that much was clear, but she was no lorekeeper. She couldn’t see beneath the surface the way the magically-imbued could—the only thing that could give Lethie away here was her own mistakes. Lethie forced herself to relax, grateful at least that she wouldn’t have to kill Virien where she stood. And an idea occurred to her, as awful and inevitable as breathing.

Lethie nodded slowly, and saw the glint of satisfaction on Virien’s face. “Can I rely on your discretion? I don’t have many other advantages.”

The blonde shrugged. “I’ve no interest in gossiping with the others. You can keep your secrets.”

“You have my gratitude,” Lethie said. She waited for the other wolf to turn away, then cleared her throat and spoke quickly. “The eastern face is steepest. It seems like the quickest way back to the beach, but you’ll waste twice as much time getting down without breaking your legs.”

“Is that so?” Virien looked at her closely. Lethie sighed, as if she were acting against her better judgment, and nodded towards the path that led down the mountain’s northernmost face. Virien studied her for a long moment...and then, with an impressive speed, she was wolf-shaped and making her rapid way down the side of the mountain in

showers of pebbles and dirt, the volcanic rock held tightly in her jaws.

Lethie waited until she was out of sight, then headed for the southern side of the mountain, where she knew she could gain access to the caves beneath Rochmar's surface. It was an unpleasant journey back to the beach in the absolute blackness of the caves, but a safer one by far than the dangerous route she'd recommended to Virien. She emerged onto the sand half an hour later with her trophy held aloft, and the roar of applause from the pack waiting there even made her lips twitch in something that might have been trying to become a smile. Torren was at her side, larger than life, his silver eyes shining as he congratulated her on her second victory in as many days.

Roda arrived half an hour later, scraped and bruised with an expression on her face that was worlds away from the perky smile she'd greeted the Alpha with that morning. As the morning gave way to afternoon, the rest of the contestants came out of the trees in varying states of exhaustion, their pointless prizes gripped tightly in their fists. Lethie didn't miss the looks of smoldering resentment her fellow competitors shot her as they realized she'd beaten them again. Roda's anger seemed to burn the brightest, but Lethie knew that that was only because Virien hadn't gotten there yet. She had a feeling that the blonde might actually hit her—if she still had the energy left, that was, after hacking her way through the thickest and most impenetrable jungle on the island. Lethie was looking forward to it. Some part of her knew she deserved it.

But the morning wore into afternoon, and the afternoon wore into evening...and when nightfall came, there was still no sign of Virien.

Chapter 5 - Torren

“You were warned, Torren. You were warned that this would happen.”

For what felt like the fiftieth time, Torren took a deep, steadying breath and reminded himself that it would be deeply inappropriate to tell his fellow Alphas to shove it. How many times did they intend on repeating themselves? Every single one of them had said some version of ‘I told you so’ at least a hundred times so far. At what point was he allowed to tell them that he got the message the first ten times they’d said it?

“You knew you were putting your entire pack at risk, and now a great tragedy has befallen one of your pack members.”

“*Provisional* pack members,” Belmont broke in, his expression more foreboding than Torren had ever seen it. “The woman had not even been offered full membership in Torren’s pack yet, as I understand it. That invitation would depend on her—*performance*.”

“Her membership status has nothing to do with her going missing,” Torren snapped. “Which, I’ll remind you, only happened a few days ago. For all we know she’s holed up in a cave somewhere, waiting to heal up enough to get back to us. Stranger things have happened.” The expressions on the faces of his fellow Alphas told him that this wasn’t as convincing an argument as he’d hoped it would be. Torren scowled.

“Nevertheless,” Renfrey said darkly. “Your reckless decision to hold a competition has likely cost this woman her life—”

“I object to that,” Torren snapped. “Virien was—Virien *is*,” he corrected himself sharply, “we don’t know that she’s dead—Virien is as skilled a warrior as anyone here. She has years of experience fighting demons, and she knew *exactly* what she was getting into when she came here. It’s downright

insulting to talk about her like some innocent little child who I tricked into coming to my—my evil sex competition, or whatever it is you think we're doing over there—”

“Enough!” Renfrey’s voice boomed through the Kurivon community center, cutting Torren dead in his tracks. “Further discussion is clearly of no use. You and your pack will continue the search for the missing wolf. And I will suggest, with all the authority I possess as Alpha and overseer of our collective project here, that you think very seriously about putting a stop to these absurd trials before even more damage can be done. That will be all. You’re excused, Alpha Torren.”

“There are half a dozen more items on the agenda,” Torren pointed out. But Renfrey shook his head, his expression grim.

“You have more pressing priorities.”

Torren felt his temper flaring. “Fine,” he said through gritted teeth. “Don’t think I’ll be overlooking this insult, by the way. Ejecting an Alpha from a council meeting—”

“Just go, Torren.” Blaine’s voice was low and sonorous, but it was the note of sadness that really took the wind out of Torren’s sails. He stalked jaggedly from the community center and closed the door behind him, too hard. The slam didn’t make him feel any better. Being scolded by the other Alphas was one thing...but hearing that note of disappointment from Blaine was something else entirely.

Maybe he shouldn’t have told the other Alphas about what had happened, he thought as he stomped through the sleepy settlement of Kurivon in the late afternoon sunlight. But Virien had been missing for several days, and withholding that information would have made him look like he felt guilty about it. He did feel guilty about it, of course, but that was beside the point. Everything he’d said in that meeting had been true. Virien had come to a demon-infested island to participate in a series of dangerous trials. She’d known exactly what she

was getting herself into, and it wasn't his fault that it had gotten her killed.

“If,” he corrected himself aloud, drawing confused glances from a group of wolves he was storming past. His pack had spent the last two days combing the island in search of the missing contestant, but they hadn't found any sign of her. As long as they didn't find a body, it was still possible that she was alive. Not that the search process was going particularly well, of course. The jungle was dense and almost impossible to navigate, and it didn't help that they had to stop regularly to fight off the powerful demons that lived in that dense vegetation. There'd been no serious injuries yet, but he knew from experience that the more deeply they penetrated the jungle, the more demonic activity they'd stir up.

He spent the boat trip back to Rochmar in brooding silence, grateful to be leaving Kurivon behind, but deeply resentful of the way the other Alphas had made him feel. Part of him had hoped that he'd simply come ashore to find Virien sitting by the firepit with the rest of his pack, wounded perhaps, but with a hell of a story to tell...but as soon as he could make out his pack from the water, he could tell from their body language that there'd been no good news. Baltar was waiting for him on the beach. He could see that his best friend was exhausted—he'd insisted on taking far more than his share of search party shifts, and the work was clearly taking a toll on him. Torren steered him towards the firepit. He knew he couldn't force Baltar to rest if he didn't want to, but he was hoping he could trick the man into at least eating a few bites while they talked.

He filled him in on the council meeting. Worried as he was, Baltar was never one to miss the opportunity to make a few jokes at the expense of others, and Torren appreciated the opportunity to laugh.

“Screw 'em,” was his second-in-command's summary of the situation, once Torren had finished the story—including the humiliating detail of being ejected early from the meeting. “What do they know about any of it? We're on our own over

here. We'll handle it ourselves." His restless gaze moved beyond him to the trees, and Torren turned to see what he'd been distracted by. Another search party was returning—this one, he noticed with surprise, composed of a handful of the contestants. Almost immediately, he wondered why that had surprised him. They might have been competing with one another, but they were still wolves; they wouldn't stand by while someone was in danger.

"Join us," Baltar called, gesturing to the empty places around the firepit. "Report."

Roda's once-cheerful face was a solemn mask, her worry about the missing wolf vivid on her face. Torren remembered that Virien had helped her out of a tight spot during the first trial, and felt a pang of sympathy for the grim-looking young woman. She'd been patrolling with Ditha, the contestant he'd come to know from the long hours she spent sharpening and polishing her prized pair of curved knives. She drummed her fingers restlessly on the hilts now, her silver eyes faraway, and he knew before either of them spoke that their search had been fruitless.

"We've only searched a fraction of the island," Roda said impatiently. "That's the problem. She could be a few hundred feet away from camp and we wouldn't know it."

"Fire," Ditha said meditatively, her eyes on the ashes of last night's blaze. "Perhaps if we burnt all the trees, we'd find her."

"Or burn her up," Roda said, glancing at her. "Not that I'm not tempted by the idea..."

"Won't work." Torren turned sharply, feeling that rasping, unusual voice shiver down his spine as though it had stroked him. The woman he'd come to think of as the seventh competitor was standing behind them, that awkward, too-intense gaze boring past him and into the ground at his feet. "Fire won't take hold."

“In trees that dense? Of course it would.” Roda’s eyes had narrowed at the sight of Lethie, and Torren could see her tensing up further as the other woman approached. It had become clear, over the last few worried days, that the contestants didn’t care for Lethie. The competitive but respectful sense of camaraderie that had developed among them didn’t extend to include her, though whether that was her fault or theirs, Torren wasn’t sure.

“No. Trees aren’t like Halforst trees. It’s temperate there, dry. Here the air and the soil and even the wood’s full of water. Fire won’t hold.”

“I think that’s the most I’ve ever heard you speak,” Torren pointed out, hoping his light tone might ease some of the tension. No luck. Lethie’s face turned to stone, and she seemed to close in on herself, as though embarrassed to have spoken—and, predictably, he saw the other two contestants exchange dark glances with each other, clearly resentful of the attention she was receiving. Torren ignored them. He’d had precious little opportunity to speak with Lethie; she’d been making herself even more scarce since the second trial, if that was possible, and if he had to shake her by the shoulders to make her converse with him, he would. “Does this expertise come from your background as a hunter?” he pressed. “I feel like I know every other contestant’s entire life story, but I don’t even know what kind of weapon you fight with.”

Lethie looked hunted. Roda and Ditha were glaring daggers at her, and he knew Baltar was no doubt relishing the tension in the air. “Fire—” She cleared her throat. “Worked on some. The ones that were vulnerable to it. Others...like using water against a fish.”

“Why *don’t* you have a weapon?” Ditha said abruptly, before Torren could ask any further questions. “Or any clothes?”

Lethie’s face was stone again, and she plucked pointedly at the sleeve of her dark shirt. Torren had noticed, of course, that the other contestants regularly changed their

clothes, opting for more flattering outfits in the evenings and more practical clothing for the trials or search patrols. Lethie, by contrast, was wearing the same thing every time he saw her. It hadn't occurred to him that she simply didn't have any other option.

"I've seen your cot, there's nothing else there," Ditha pressed, her tone light but her eyes hard. "What do you do, dive into the sea and wash your clothes and your body all at once? That would explain your hair, I suppose."

"Ditha," Roda said softly.

"I'm not trying to be nasty," Ditha said, a little too quickly. "I just mean—you can borrow a comb, if you like. Azur's got plenty."

"Had to leave home quickly," Lethie said quietly. "Couldn't pack."

"Even your weapons?"

"*Ditha*," Roda said again, more sharply.

"I just think it's strange. Can't I ask questions, if I think something's strange?"

"Not if you're being rude."

Even though it was Roda and Ditha who were speaking, Torren found that he was looking at Lethie. Her dull silver eyes, which so often slid away, were trained with laser-sharp focus on the arguing women, and as he watched, he saw a strange, almost hungry look move across her face. And why was it that when she spoke, he was reminded of a predatory bird diving to seize its prey?

"I understand, we're all worried," she said, in that awkward, rasping voice. "Ditha's just a little paranoid."

Ditha's hand flew to the hilt of one of her knives. Torren felt Baltar tense at his side at the look of naked fury on Ditha's face—Roda had already put a steadying hand on her shoulder, clearly readying herself to physically intervene if it

came to it. Only Lethie was still, a stone monument in the fading sunset light.

“Roda, get your hand off my shoulder, please.” Ditha’s voice was forcefully calm, but her eyes hadn’t left Lethie’s face.

“No. She’s right,” Roda said sharply. “We’re all stressed, but you’re acting *crazy*.”

“What would *you* know?” Ditha snapped, the calm breaking a little. Roda flinched.

“You shouldn’t condescend to Roda so much, Ditha,” Lethie said, cutting Roda off before she could speak. “She’s not a child, no matter what you call her in private.”

“I don’t—” Ditha started. But Roda was already on her feet, her fists balled at her sides and her eyes burning with anger. She stormed off toward the tent the competitors were sharing. Ditha watched her go, then turned back to Lethie, a look of realization in her slightly narrowed eyes. “I see you,” she said simply. And before Torren could intervene, she was gone, too, striding away towards the far end of the beach and disappearing into the trees.

A long silence stretched out. As usual, it was Baltar who broke it with a long whistle. “Tensions are high, huh?” he said faintly. “I might—go and make sure everyone’s alright.”

“I said something wrong,” Lethie said softly once Baltar had gone, curling in on herself a little. Had Torren imagined that look on her face, that strange, eager light that had danced in those dull eyes? She was looking up at him now, but all he could read in her face was dismay. “I—it’s been—I’ve been alone,” she said, her hoarse voice halting. “I’ve been alone a long time, and I’ve forgotten how to—be, around others. How I look. How I sound.”

“Alone? No pack, no family?” How old was this woman, anyway? He’d assumed she was well into maturity from the foreboding way she carried herself, not to mention her tenacity and her skill—but right now, she seemed as fragile

as a child. She shook her head, lips pressed hard together as she struggled to hold his gaze. Without realizing he was doing it, he reached out to put an arm around her slender shoulders. He'd expected her to be brittle and cold to the touch, but he was surprised by the warmth that seemed to emanate from her body and into his. He felt an odd fluttering in his chest, a strange sense of triumph when she didn't flinch away from him.

"My pack were all killed by demons," she said, her voice low. "I survived. I survived alone, for years. I did what I had to."

"You're not alone now," he told her, some strange impulse telling him to reach out and lift her chin, bringing those silver eyes back to meet his. For a moment, something shivered in the air between them. What was he looking at? What was it about this woman that made him feel like he was missing something vitally, desperately important?

"No," Lethie said. Later, he'd remember that her voice had sounded different, but he wouldn't be able to remember exactly what it was that had made her sound so strange. "No, I'm not."

And before he could even draw breath to reply, she was gone, leaving him with that odd, fluttering feeling in his chest, and even more questions than he'd started with.

Chapter 6 - Lethie

She'd been worried that the missing contestant might put an end to the Soulmate Games. But she needn't have worried. The arrogance burned far too brightly in both Torren and his second-in-command to allow a minor setback to stop them from doing exactly what they pleased. And so it was that four days after Virien's disappearance, the announcement was made that the third trial would commence the following day, at dusk. Lethie kept her expression blank, curious about how her fellow contestants felt about the subject. It was getting harder to find out such things, mostly because very few of them seemed to be speaking to one another. She'd done slightly too well at turning them against each other.

But their dislike for each other still paled in comparison to how much they all hated her.

It was Torren's fault, really. After that first little altercation at the firepit, he'd gone to talk to the other contestants, sharing some of the largely fictional sob story she'd told him and instructing them to be kind to her. Had he really imagined that that would work, she wondered? When she'd stepped into the tent later that night, the atmosphere had been so thick with resentment that it almost drowned out the island's background radiation of demonic taint. It had been all she could do not to laugh.

Are you enjoying this, she wondered? Are you feasting on all this fresh suffering I'm bringing you?

The nature of the third trial, though, was enough to give her pause. Baltar declared that it was a test of wits, which was why they were given a full day to think and plan before the trial would commence. Their task was deceptively simple—head into the jungle, and bring back a demon, incapacitated but alive. Whoever brought the most powerful captive back would be the winner. Lethie knew that for her, this would be

the easiest task so far...but she also knew that winning it right now would be an unforgivable mistake.

It was Ditha. The dark-haired woman had been suspicious of her since the second trial, and after their confrontation at the firepit, those suspicions had become convictions. Maybe she had some magical aptitude, or maybe she was just insightful, but Ditha was convinced that Lethie harbored some demonic taint. She didn't know if she'd shared her suspicions with the others, but she did know that if she strode into camp with a powerful demon at her beck and call, suspicions would only grow. But she couldn't let herself lose, either.

And so, after Baltar's pronouncement of the third trial, just as the sun set, Lethie slipped away into the trees behind the camp. She returned quickly, before anyone could know that she was gone, and joined the rest of the pack and contestants for a subdued supper around the firepit. Torren's pack was maintaining good spirits, despite the toll that the constant search parties were clearly taking on them, and she could see that they were forming bonds already with the other contestants. No matter who actually won the trials, it seemed, the pack was ready to welcome their new members with open arms.

Well, that was nice for them. But it was none of Lethie's concern.

The attack came a little after midnight. Lethie emerged from a tranquil sleep to the sounds of shouting outside, the unmistakable thickening of demonic taint in the air, the electricity of wolves readying themselves for battle. She followed the other contestants out of the tent and onto the beach. The patchy light of the half-moon shone down on the warped and hideous bodies of several dozen demons, their dreadful voices raised to hiss and roar at the wolves who were diving into battle. Beside her, her fellow contestants shifted, and she followed them into battle in her wolf form, paws thudding hard against sand that was already stained with thick, acrid demon blood.

She'd checked, earlier, whether the blood that spilled from her veins bore any resemblance to that reeking sludge, knowing that if it did her plans would be complicated. But to her relief, her blood still ran red as any true wolf's. And what was one more lie on the pile?

It was a demon shaped like a great insect that took her down, in the end. Her instructions had been not to hold back, and it seemed the demons had not needed to be told twice. The creature struck her a glancing blow to the side of the head that sent her staggering, before following up with a dozen hard strikes against her ribs, each delivered by a different, pointed leg jutting from the beast's warped carapace. Snarling, she spun to clamp her jaws around one of the offending legs and ripped it clear off its host's body—but in doing so, she unwittingly drew it closer to her, and by the time she felt the jab of its stinger, it was too late. The poison coursed through her in a stinging wave that was just as quickly replaced by a curious numbness. She dropped heavily to the sand, her howl of rage dying in her throat as she lost feeling in all four legs at once. There was something oddly familiar about it. For a dizzy, confusing moment, she wondered if her demonic masters had chosen that moment to reclaim her body after all, to turn her into one more of the monstrous foot soldiers who were attacking the wolf pack's camp. It would have been a relief, she found herself thinking. To put an end to all this betrayal. To be honest, at last, about her intentions here.

But no—she was still a wolf, albeit a wolf whose paws wouldn't obey her instructions. She winced in pain as the demon struck her again and again, ribs cracking beneath each blow, fresh blood oozing down her incapacitated body. Lethie wondered, for a moment, if she might die here. There would be a certain poetic justice in that, wouldn't there? But then there was a furious howl, and her attacker went flying backwards in a scramble of limbs. Somehow, she knew who had come to her rescue, even before she caught a flash of that snow-white pelt. Torren, his movements a blur as he set about eviscerating the demon with surgical precision. She watched,

impressed by his efficiency despite herself. Every demon was formed differently; there was no universal weak spot to learn, no recurring pattern with which to familiarize oneself. A demon was killed only by the destruction of its body, and the mark of a truly experienced demon hunter was the speed and proficiency with which they could reduce a demonic manifestation to its constituent parts.

How embarrassing, Lethie thought as the blood loss began to take hold. She'd have preferred it if her last thought before losing consciousness hadn't been that the cocksure Alpha's arrogance was more than justified by his skill in battle.

Things were blurry, then, for quite a while. She felt herself move in and out of consciousness a few times—once when they moved her from the beach, pain from her broken ribs lancing through her body and making her yelp, and again when she felt someone shaking her shoulder, urging her to shift back to her human form. Lethie almost laughed. She'd forgotten. One of the most basic facts of wolf anatomy, and she'd forgotten—the two-legged form, while more vulnerable to injury, also healed much more quickly. She managed to transform with the last of her energy, and then the darkness took her again.

At first, when she woke, she had no idea where she was. The canvas above her was unfamiliar—clearly the interior of a tent, but not the one she shared with the contestants who hated her guts. The memory of their scorn anchored her just enough that, when she opened her eyes, she was able to avoid recoiling in shock at who was touching her. Torren was kneeling by her side, a curiously unguarded expression on his face. He hadn't realized she'd woken. Too focused on what he was doing—which, she saw with an uneasy lurch, was stitching a great wound in her thigh. Blood rushed to her face at the subsequent realization that not only had her vulnerable, unconscious body been brought to Torren's quarters, but that someone had seen fit to remove most of her clothing, too. Somehow, the pain of having the wound in her

leg stitched paled utterly in comparison to the humiliation of knowing that this man had seen her naked body. Her face burned, and she must have shifted her weight or altered her breathing, because suddenly Torren's eyes were on hers, his expression full of surprise and relief.

"Fight's over," he said, and the speed of his words told her he'd given this particular speech a great many times. "All demons down, perimeter secure. We're safe. Stand down."

The familiarity of it almost made her laugh. Once, a long time ago, she'd been exactly the kind of soldier who'd need orders like that barked at her upon waking with an injury. She forced her muscles to relax, grateful at least that he'd assumed her tension had to do with the battle, not with how vulnerable she'd felt at the thought of him handling her half-naked body... another shudder ripped through her, and she reached blindly for something, anything, to cover herself. Torren pulled a blanket over her torso, which she realized—too late—was already bandaged.

"You took a lot of damage," Torren said, clearly reading the surprise on her face. "At least five broken ribs, which you can probably feel, some deep gouges on your chest and arms. This is the only one that needed stitches, though," he added, gesturing to her right thigh. "If it hadn't been for Azur jumping in, that demon might've separated your leg from your body altogether."

"I don't remember," she said. "I only remember—you."

An odd little smile crossed his face at that. "Understandable," he replied, the bravado coming a half-second too late to hide the fact that he'd been genuinely pleased by what she'd said. His expression sobered. "I'm not surprised you lost consciousness. We nearly lost you there, Lethie."

This wasn't good, she thought, something uncomfortably close to panic making itself known in her belly. There was something wrong with her. Had it been the blow to

her head, the near-death experience? Had it done something to the layers and layers of hard, unfeeling stone she'd put up between her and the world around her? The concern in Torren's voice, the gentle, oddly intimate way he'd touched her knee before he returned to dressing the wound on her thigh...it had struck deeply at a part of her she'd hoped was gone for good.

"The pack," she heard herself say, and it was an instinct that belonged far too much to her old self. "Are the pack—"

"No deaths," Torren said with that same easy speed, one hand pressing lightly but firmly against her hip to prevent her from rising. "A few injuries, but yours are the worst by far. Which is why you're here, by the way," he added, almost apologetically. "I know it was probably disorienting to wake up here, but I didn't want to keep the others awake while I dressed your wounds."

"Why you?" she asked, suddenly suspicious. The Alpha himself, playing healer? Was this about to turn into an interrogation?

"Because I'm the best," Torren said carelessly, tightening the bandage around her thigh before sitting back on his heels to scrutinize his work. In the lamplight, he looked somehow more solid than usual, more real. His shirt was wrinkled and torn, stained in several places, and there were smudges of either dirt or blood disrupting his usually flawless complexion. Even the usual glow of his silver-blond hair seemed muted with exhaustion. So why was it that when those tired silver eyes met hers, she felt her whole body tingle? Why did he look better to her than he ever had? "Genuinely, I am," he added, and she realized she'd been staring at him in frozen silence. "One of the many benefits of being a reckless, arrogant fool is that I've had a lot of experience patching up wounds."

She froze again. Had she been talking in her sleep? "Did I call you...?"

“A reckless, arrogant fool? No.” He chuckled.
“Though you’d be forgiven for thinking it. Most people do.”

This was more self-awareness than she’d expected from the Alpha. She pulled the blanket a little closer around her shoulders, wincing a little as the movement jarred her ribs. “Coming here,” she offered, some instinct warning her not to let the silence between them stretch on too long. “Some would call that...”

“Stupid. Crazy. A suicide mission.” He pushed his sweep of hair out of his eyes with one hand, a rueful smile warming his face in the lamplight. “What can I say? It’s what we do.” He paused for a moment. “It’s what I do. What I’ve always done. What’s the point of being alive if you’re not testing your limits? And the wolves who follow me, they share that philosophy. We might seem crazy, but nobody’s here who doesn’t want to be.” Lethie realized she was holding her breath, then let it out in a rush, annoyed with herself.

“Important work, at least. Banishing demons.” The ghost of her former self hadn’t gone far at all, had she? That old martial spirit, that old commitment to the cause, even as her corrupted heart pumped corrupted blood through her corrupted body.

“Sure.” Torren chuckled. “I’m happy to be working for a good cause. But I’d be lying if I told you that that was the main reason I do what I do.” He exhaled, his gaze distant for a moment. “Sorry. I always get kind of—maudlin, when the adrenaline starts wearing off.”

“Drunk,” she heard herself say. Torren quirked an eyebrow at her. “I always thought of it like being drunk. The near misses, they always made me...brash. Loud.”

Torren tilted his head, smiling faintly at her. “Why do you talk in the past tense so much?”

“What?”

“Something I’ve noticed. When you talk about demons you’ve killed, fights you’ve been in—you talk about it like it’s

over. Like it's something you don't do anymore."

Stupid, Lethie thought faintly, letting her expression freeze solid while she tried to manage the sudden rush of terror that had seized her. Stupid of her, to assume his seeming arrogance meant he wasn't paying attention. Hadn't she done everything in her power to seem mysterious and aloof? Didn't it make sense that he'd be scrutinizing every tiny glimpse he got of her, every word she said? She forced herself to meet his eyes, terrified she'd see some hint of suspicion in those depths, like the look she'd seen on Ditha's face that night at the firepit when she'd pushed too far and aroused her suspicions. But there was nothing but curiosity in Torren's face—curiosity, and a strange, gentle warmth that was quite at odds with the brash, cocksure behavior he usually exhibited. Stupid, Lethie cursed herself again. How unforgivably stupid of her, to assume that she was the only person who knew how to wear a mask.

"I don't mean to embarrass you," he said at last, breaking the silence that had been threatening to choke her. "But at the risk of showing my hand... I have to admit, Lethie, you're a fascinating woman. Every time we speak, I have more questions about who you are, about where you've come from. I mean, you bested Baltar in a fight the first day you were here. You beat six of the most accomplished warriors Halforst has to offer—twice. You..." He broke off, clearly noticing the uneasiness on her face. "You fascinate me, that's all," he said simply. "I've spoken to all the others enough to know who they are and why they want to win this. But you... you, I can't get a read on at all."

Enough, Lethie thought firmly. Enough of this deeply dangerous conversation. There was no pretending that this was all part of her scheme to get closer to him—she couldn't remember being any less in control of herself, and the idea that she was manipulating this situation to her own advantage was laughable. As much as she might have wanted to follow this conversation to its conclusion, she knew in her bones that she couldn't trust that instinct to keep her safe. So instead, she

wincing a little, and let her eyelids flutter as though she was fighting unconsciousness. Like any good healer, Torren murmured an apology, drew the blanket around her shoulders and left her to rest. She watched him through half-closed eyes as he leaned over the table to dim the light of the lamp, and when he cast a final glance back at her over his shoulder, the tender, searching look in his eyes was almost too much to handle.

Lethie lay awake for a long time after Torren had settled into his own bed, fancying she could make out the soft sounds of his breathing even over the distant rush of the waves against the sandy shore. Her heart was thudding sickly against her chest, and she couldn't figure out if what she was feeling was fear, anger, despair, or a mix of all three. What frightened her wasn't that Torren was suspicious of her true nature. If anything, this conversation had reassured her that while he might be fiercely curious about who she was, demonic corruption was the last thing on his mind. This wasn't the conduct of a man who suspected that the injured woman in his tent was a demonic spy, sent to corrupt both him and his pack and to sabotage every part of his mission here.

If anything, this was the conduct of a man who suspected that she might be his soulmate.

She knew that that should have been good news to her. When it came to her mission, anything she could use to manipulate the Alpha was a big win. But she didn't feel like she'd won at all. She felt an awful, sick, churning feeling of guilt and shame at the pit of her stomach, so strong that it threatened to reach up and swallow her whole. And with everything that was at stake here, she couldn't afford those feelings.

It was far, far too late for that to do anyone any good.

Chapter 7 - Torren

It was an indication of just how exhausted Torren really was that he was able to fall asleep so quickly that night. The knowledge that Lethie was there in his tent, wrapped in little more than a blanket, kept sending strange sparks cascading up and down his spine. Was that why he'd talked so much, he wondered? He'd blathered on at her like an idiot. He'd blamed it on the adrenaline, on the exhaustion of the demonic onslaught and its aftermath, but the truth was that it had a lot more to do with Lethie than it did with his own delirium. Something had changed in him when he'd lifted her unconscious body into his arms and taken her to safety. He'd dressed the wounds of his packmates hundreds of times before, but it had never felt so intimate, so holy, as it had when he'd taken care of Lethie.

If he hadn't had bigger things on his mind, he might have started to worry that he'd been wrong about the whole soulmate situation. But that was a thought that he was going to place firmly in the 'later' pile.

The first thing Torren did when he woke the next morning was to check on his patient. Some dizzy part of him was half-convinced he'd dreamed their whole conversation the night before, but sure enough, there she lay, right where he'd left her. She was still fast asleep, her narrow, pointed face so strangely peaceful where it rested on the pillow of her hands. Carefully, he eased back the blanket to check her dressings, relieved to note that her wounds didn't seem to have bled through their bandages. Then he tucked the blanket back around her shoulders and slipped out of the tent, holding his breath to avoid disturbing her any further.

He'd instructed his pack to sleep as late as they could—but as usual, it seemed, they'd chosen to ignore him. Half a dozen of them were out on the beach already, hard at work clearing the encrusted remnants of the defeated demons from

the sand. A few of the tents had been torn down in the attack; he could see a few of his packmates sitting in the shade of the treeline with a few of the contestants, working together to repair pieces of torn canvas with needle and thread. Baltar was overseeing the operations, of course, despite being the most seriously injured aside from Lethie. He was limping heavily, and his left arm was in a sling, but he was nevertheless in good spirits when Torren approached him.

“It’s downright warped, how cheerful you get after a bloodbath,” Torren informed him by way of greeting. Baltar’s grin only widened.

“Nonsense. Nobody died, and it’s good for morale, a bit of bloodshed. And we’ve christened the place properly, too,” he added, kicking at a chunk of dried demon blood on the sand at their feet. “Let the locals know who we are and what we do. How’s Lethie?”

Ignoring the way the sound of her name made him feel, Torren glanced back towards his tent. “She’ll mend,” he said with a nod. “The leg wound needed stitches and most of her ribs were either cracked or broken, but she’ll heal.”

“A few days rest and a few solid meals,” Baltar agreed with a firm nod. “Not to be unkind, but she looked in pretty sore need of that already.” Torren tried to keep his expression neutral, but Baltar had always been better than most at reading him. “What? You have to admit, by looks alone, a blind man would tell you she’s in last place by a mile—”

“Still kicked your ass though, didn’t she?” Torren retorted, a little too fast. Baltar absorbed the blow, his grin fading just a little—quickly replaced by a sharp, hungry curiosity.

“Hit a nerve there, did I? Has the mighty Alpha picked a *favorite* among the ladies desperately seeking his favor?”

Torren felt his hackles rise. It was an obvious goad, but he was still wired from the battle last night, exhausted from the after-effects of adrenaline, and—on a deeper level he was

doing his best not to think about—unnerved by the way his feelings about Lethie were developing. “Are you seriously trying to act like I’m the macho asshole who wanted women fighting over me?” he said, lowering his voice in case the pack overheard. “Remind me, because I guess I must’ve forgotten somehow. Who was it that planned this whole stupid event in the first place? Was it me?”

“Woah, brother,” Baltar said, raising his hands in surrender. Torren could tell that the look of wounded pride on his face was only partly in jest. “Consider me well and truly scolded, alright? Yikes.”

“Just—they all risked their lives last night, yeah? Let’s be respectful.”

“I solemnly swear I won’t make any more comments about the appearance of the contestant who looks like she was dragged here upside down through a bog.”

“Baltar—”

“Starting now! Starting now.” Torren shook his head, resisting the urge to smack his friend in the face. He did his best to keep their frequent wrestling matches out of sight of the rest of the pack. “Camp’s almost good as new, by the way, not that you asked.”

“Yeah? You did your job, then? Incredible news.”

“Tents are almost all patched, demon guts removed, cuts and scratches healing nicely. Ready for round two,” Baltar concluded with a savage grin. “What do you say, should we take the fight to them this time? Lai’s been keeping an eye out during the search patrols, she reckons the island’s cave system is most likely where we’ll find the heart of the rot—”

“Let’s get a shade more settled before we go cave-diving, hm?” Exasperating as the suggestion was, Torren couldn’t help but admire his second-in-command’s enthusiasm. Baltar rolled his eyes.

“We’ve got to keep ourselves busy somehow. Broken ribs mean Lethie’s out of action for... what, three days at least.

What better way to kill time until the next trial?”

“The next trial?”

“Well, we’re hardly going to make her compete with eight broken ribs and her leg hanging off,” Baltar scoffed. “Relax, I’ve already talked it over with the other contestants, they’re happy to wait a few days.”

“Look, Baltar...” Torren took a deep breath. He’d hoped to have a little more time to plan this conversation, but his best friend had always had a way of ambushing him. “I’m wondering if we don’t just call it quits with the soulmate games, hey? I mean, first Virien going missing, now the surprise demon attack...I feel like we’re being sent a message, you know?”

“Are you kidding? The demon attack?” Baltar rolled his eyes again, somehow involving his whole body in the movement to emphasize his scorn. “I’m going to do you a favor and pretend that’s the sleep deprivation talking. Demons *attack*, Torren. That’s what they do. You’re kidding yourself if you think that had the slightest thing to do with the trials.”

“You’re not the one who’s going to get raked over the coals by the other Alphas for the third time in a week,” Torren said irritably.

“You’re worried about the other Alphas? Seriously? Screw ‘em!” Baltar looked genuinely annoyed as he grabbed Torren by the shoulders and shook him, a little harder than was strictly necessary. “The only Alpha I give a damn about is standing right here in front of me, you hear me? Who needs the approval of that boring old bunch of—of *dads*?” The scorn that dripped from Baltar’s voice made the word sound like a dire insult. Torren let his gaze slide out over the water for a minute, to where the neighboring island of Kurivon was visible over the choppy waves. He remembered how bored he’d felt, how stifled and trapped in that peaceful, sleepy little town...how much he’d been looking forward to being where he was right now. Baltar was waiting for him to reply, shifting

impatiently from foot to foot, and he sighed, scrubbing his weary face with the palm of one hand.

“You’re right, of course.”

“Always,” his second-in-command said promptly. “You’re welcome. Reality checks are just one of the many services I provide—”

“Yeah, yeah,” Torren said with a roll of his eyes. “If repairs are sorted and we’re not running the trial for a few days, I want every able-bodied wolf out searching for Virien. An attack like that should’ve put a dent in their numbers, we should take full advantage. At the very least, they’ll think twice about attacking our patrols,” he added, frowning slightly. Baltar snapped off a neat little salute—Torren had never worked out whether the gesture was sarcastic or not, but he wasn’t going to give his friend the satisfaction of asking him. But he hesitated before he left.

“Oh, do you need a hand moving Lethie?”

“Moving her?”

“Back to her bunk, I mean.” Baltar gestured towards the large tent at the treeline, which had escaped damage in the demon attack. Torren hesitated, not liking the jolt of possessive, impulsive anger that had shot through him at the very thought of Baltar laying his hands on Lethie. What had gotten into him?

“Leave her for now,” he said, glad of how much practice he’d had at sounding casual. “She was fast asleep when I last checked on her, no sense waking her unnecessarily.”

“If you’re sure,” Baltar said, lifting an eyebrow. “And you’re willing to risk the wrath of the others.” Torren looked at him questioningly. “You haven’t noticed? The other contestants *hate* her. I mean, they’re competitive with each other, but they’re downright murderous when it comes to Lethie.” He shook his head, eyes dancing with amusement. “They were already mad about her winning all the trials, and

now she's spent the night in the Alpha's tent? Having her wounds dressed by his big, strong hands?"

"Don't be a creep," Torren said automatically, but he couldn't help but feel uneasy about what Baltar was saying. He'd seen it himself, the hostility the other women seemed to harbor towards Lethie in particular; had he unwittingly made things a lot worse for her by taking her into his tent last night? Well, some dark, possessive voice whispered in the back of his mind, all the more reason to keep her there, where he could protect her from her enemies...

The thought of Lethie preoccupied him for the rest of the day, though he did his best to distract himself with the ongoing search efforts. It seemed Baltar wasn't alone in having drawn inspiration from the attack last night—his pack was in good spirits, swapping fresh stories about the battle last night, already looking forward to the next skirmish with their ancient enemy. The newcomers, he noticed, were a little more subdued, though part of him worried that their more sullen moods might have something to do with his presence. It made him worry more and more about Lethie as the day wore on. If the contestants were this annoyed with him, he couldn't imagine what kind of unpleasantness might await Lethie when she returned to her bunk.

It just made sense for her to stay with him a little longer, he told himself firmly as he headed back to camp in the warm light of sunset. It had nothing to do with his feelings, and everything to do with her safety. Her wounds would heal a lot better in a less hostile environment than the one that was clearly waiting for her with the other contestants. They could think what they liked about his motivations. Besides, he thought with a pang of irritation, he was the Alpha, wasn't he? Why was he concerning himself with the contestants' feelings? These were the Soulmate Games. They were here to impress him, not the other way around.

Lethie was just stirring from a deep sleep when he slipped into the tent to see her, bringing fresh water and a plate of food in case her appetite had returned. She'd made a good

attempt at the midday meal that had been left by her bedside, he noticed with a nod of approval. Her face was pale and wan when he looked down at it, her eyes dull and her jaw tense—but that was hardly out of the ordinary for her. She sat up gingerly when he knelt at her side, allowing him to check her bandages.

“Will I live?” came her rasping voice, always quiet enough that he had to lean in to catch it.

“What? Of course you will.” Torren frowned, looking up from his inspection of the wound in her leg to search her face with mounting worry. Some demons harbored slow-acting poisons, sinister things that were hard to detect, save for the wasting effect they had on their victims. “Are you feeling weaker than last night? Feverish?”

Her expression flickered into a reluctant grimace and she shook her head sharply. “No. No, I’m—”

“If there’s any chance you’ve been poisoned, Lethie, we have to act right away.” His heart was thudding uncomfortably hard against his ribs as his mind raced. “There are lorekeepers on Kurivon with experience in demonic infection, I can send for someone—”

“No!” Had he ever heard her speak so loudly? For a moment, she reminded him of a drill instructor—the image made a downright comical juxtaposition with the fragile, bandage-swathed woman lying on the cot in front of him. Her face was pale, and she pressed her lips tightly together before uttering a strange, hoarse little bark of what he eventually realized was laughter. “No, Alpha, I’m—I was trying to make a joke.”

“Oh.” Torren sat back on his heels, his panic immediately replaced by embarrassment. “Oh, I see.”

“Because—you know, the wound’s closed right over, I’m certainly not at any risk of—”

“Yes. No. No, it’s—it was funny.”

“Clearly not. I apologize for worrying you unduly.” There it was—that strange, halting formality again. Was that a feature of her having been alone for so long, he wondered? She’d said she’d forgotten how to be around people; would that explain why half the time she spoke as though she’d almost forgotten the words she was using? “I’ve displeased you.” She sounded worried, and Torren realized with a jolt that he must have been frowning.

“Not at all,” he said quickly, reaching out to touch her shoulder in a wordless apology before he could think to hold back the gesture. His fingertips brushed the bare skin between bandages, and he saw her shiver a little in response, as though the electricity that had moved through him at the contact had also affected her. Her eyes jerked up to meet his, and for a heartbeat he saw a whirl of emotion there—shock, realization, and something unsettlingly like fear. She cleared her throat as her face closed over, returning to its usual stony, unflinching mask, and Torren thought better of his sudden urge to ask her what exactly it was that she was so afraid of. Certainly not him. What could a warrior of her level have to fear from him?

He finished examining her wounds in a silence he hoped wasn’t as awkward as it felt, avoiding any further contact with her skin at all costs. Finally, he sat back on his heels, and Lethie wrapped herself in the blanket again, finally lifting her eyes from the ground to look at his face once more.

“You’re healing well,” Torren told her. “Wounds on your torso have all closed over without any sign of infection, and the shallower ones are all but gone. The wound on your thigh needs another day, but I’ll take out the stitches in the morning. As for your ribs, you’ve likely got a better sense of them than I can get from examining you,” he added. “How does breathing feel?”

“Let’s see.” Before Torren could stop her, Lethie took a breath, her shoulders lifting as she filled her lungs far, far too deeply. Torren had had his share of broken ribs, and he wouldn’t soon forget the way even a shallow breath could send white-hot pain shooting through his chest. To do what she’d

just done—his whole body tensed in acute sympathetic pain, and his horror only intensified when he heard the unmistakable crunch of half-healed bone. Torren braced his ears for the inevitable shriek of pain that was bound to accompany such an awful mistake, but Lethie was quiet as the grave as she exhaled, only a faint shuddering in the breath to indicate she'd felt anything at all.

“Lethie,” he said faintly. “Are you—”

“The more minor cracks are gone,” she reported, her voice only a little strained. “Two major fractures still evident.”

“Evident,” he repeated faintly, the crunch of bone still echoing in his ears. “That’s one way of putting it.” She glanced at him with faint confusion in those dull silver eyes, clearly waiting for an explanation. “Do you not feel pain?” he asked, bewildered.

“I do,” she said after a momentary pause.

“I’ve never seen anyone take a full breath on a broken rib without screaming, that’s all.”

“I needed to assess the extent of the remaining injuries. The additional damage is negligible. My rate of healing won’t be affected.”

“That’s not my point.”

She shifted her weight a little, body language taking on a more guarded attitude. “Then what are you saying?”

“Nothing.” Why did this woman make him feel so clumsy? “Just—it’s an impressive tolerance for pain, that’s all. You’ve impressed me again.” Some distant part of him pointed out that there were six women on this island who’d do almost anything for a compliment like that from him. And here was Lethie, stony-faced and remote as the stars.

“A capacity for pain is no talent,” she said, her face as distant as the horizon again. “If anything, my resilience shames me. A skilled warrior learns to avoid pain, not simply to endure it.”

“You are demonstrably one of the most skilled warriors on this island,” Torren pointed out. She looked at him then for a long moment, and he could feel himself holding his breath, trying with all his might to work out what that strange expression meant, lurking in the depths of those blank silver eyes...

“Perhaps,” she said at last, her voice barely more than a whisper. “But it wasn’t enough.”

He tried, without success, to draw further explanation out of her. But he would have had more luck arguing with the ocean. Lethie settled herself back into her cot, her eyes sliding shut with every indication of exhaustion. So why did every instinct in his body tell him that she was lying there, wide awake? Torren reluctantly rose to his feet and moved away from her bedside, mind racing with unease. She was like quicksand, this woman. Every time he spoke to her, he found himself sinking deeper and deeper into confusion. But he was already looking forward to their next conversation with a ravenous, almost embarrassing enthusiasm.

It took him a long time to get to sleep that night. But strangely enough, his last thought wasn’t about Lethie. It was about the other contestants, their suspicion of Lethie, their hostility towards her. Torren wondered, as sleep finally rose up to claim him, whether it might just be possible that they were seeing something he couldn’t.

Chapter 8 - Lethie

She had to hand it to her demonic masters—they'd done a better job than she'd expected when they'd restored her to her wolf body. She'd worried, when the first blow had crushed her ribs, about whether the years of bizarre transformation to which they'd subjected her had interfered with her capacity for healing. With Torren's watchful and clearly experienced eye following every step of the healing process, suspicion could easily be raised by her wounds fading either too fast or too slow. But to her relief, as the days of her convalescence passed, she found her wounds healing right on schedule.

And more good news made itself known, once she was well enough to leave her cot. She seemed to have been granted something of a grudging reprieve by the other contestants. Ditha was still avoiding her presence at all costs, but Azur made a point of seeking her out to check in on how she was healing, and seemed pleased when Lethie thanked her for what she'd done to keep her safe in the battle.

"I'm surprised you even noticed," the woman said, shooting her a sidelong glance. "You looked out for the count when I jumped in. I was half convinced you were dead."

"The Alpha told me," she said, not liking the way his title suddenly felt heavy and strange in her mouth. Azur's eyes lit up.

"He did?"

Lethie nodded, seeing the young woman's pride swell. It was so easy to stoke up that little blaze—she embellished only a little, giving the impression that Torren had spoken at length about Azur's heroism in the battle, and by the time they parted ways she knew the girl's hopes were sky-high. They'd fall just as quickly as they'd risen, in the face of what would seem by comparison like indifference from the Alpha, and in that miserable state...Lethie gritted her teeth, not liking the

uneasy prickling in her gut. The lingering effects of her injuries, she told herself firmly, that was all it was. Not guilt. Guilt wasn't a luxury she allowed herself any longer. Even when deliberately manipulating the emotions of a woman who had risked her life to protect her from demons...

The contestants were greeted with a great round of applause when they emerged from their tent for the trial. It had been three full days since the attack, and Lethie had received the all-clear from Torren; nothing remained of her wounds but a scar on her thigh and a faint, lingering ache in her ribs that she didn't bother mentioning to him. The warm light of sunset bathed the beach in an orange glow which seemed somehow more intense, reflected as it was from the thickening clouds that had swathed the sky all day. A tropical storm was brewing, and Lethie wondered if these Halforst wolves knew what they were in for.

The six of them lined up in the sand before the podium. They'd grown accustomed to lining up in the same order each time, which put Lethie on the far end of the group yet again. Ever the outsider...but she'd worked it to her advantage, hadn't she? She'd drawn the Alpha's curiosity, then his sympathy, and even now she could feel his eyes lingering on her longer than any of the others. The others could feel it, too. Their jealousy burned on the edges of her perception, but she kept her chin up and her eyes forward. Was that new, that strange feeling of triumph, low in her belly? There was something possessive about it, about how good it felt to know how badly these women wanted Torren to look at them the way he was looking at her...

Torren's hand fell, and the trial had begun. Lethie headed for the treeline, lingering long enough to notice that all of the other contestants had run off in different directions without a backward glance. They'd learned their lesson at the second trial, then, she thought with a smirk. It was a good thing she'd sabotaged that early attempt at cooperative play—she'd have been in real trouble if they'd thought to work together.

Time was certainly on her side where this challenge was concerned. Demons were at their most active after dark, which was why this task had been scheduled to begin at dusk, and the instruction was to bring back their captive demons by midnight at the latest, though bonus credit would be awarded for those wolves who managed the task quickest. For Lethie, the only concern was deciding how quick was too quick. She knew her prize would be the most impressive by far, but that wouldn't do her any good if the speed of her success aroused the pack's suspicions.

In the end, she gave it about an hour—long enough for darkness to have fallen in earnest and for the trees around her to be alive with the shuffling, sliding steps of demons. A dangerous time for a wolf to be alone in the jungle...but Lethie was no wolf. The monstrous shapes passed her by without a second glance, sensing the rot at her core and knowing her for an ally, not a threat. It made her feel sick to her stomach, of course. But how she felt hadn't mattered to her in a long, long time.

Lethie sank both hands into the reeking soil of Rochmar, breathed deeply, and pulled at the island's rotten core. The demon's body grew in a horrific parody of nature, a warped perversion of a shrub or sapling unfolding from the earth. She drew it up from the soil, rising onto the tips of her toes as she shaped its form with her hands. The demon's flesh was soft and malleable as clay beneath her fingers, scorching hot, reeking so powerfully of sulfur and decay that her olfactory senses quickly shut down under the onslaught. Eyes stinging, she continued her work, feeling the demon begin to stir to life—or some awful imitation of it—with every touch. There was so much rot in the soil, so much corruption. She could have made this demon swell to the size of the volcano at Rochmar's center without noticeably depleting the store of monstrous energy that had amassed over centuries here.

What could a single wolf pack hope to do here? What dizzying arrogance had once led her to think that she had any power to resist this island's true masters?

Maybe it was that thought that distracted her at the crucial moment. Maybe it was the lingering effects of her injuries, the slight ache at the top of each breath pulling her attention from her surroundings. Most likely, though, it was her ego that was to blame. She was so focused on the demon she was summoning, so entranced by the work of ensuring it would make a dramatic impact on the wolves waiting on the beach, so thrilled by the prospect of their shock, their awe at her skill not only in defeating a demon this powerful, but in bringing it back alive...

And later, she would be humiliated to remember that her demonic creation reacted to the danger before she did.

The beast flinched. Then there was a sudden, overwhelming impact. She'd already been off-balance, standing on her tip-toes the better to work on her creation's wickedly serrated horns, and at the blow to her side she hit the ground hard, breath leaving her lungs in a surprised rush. Too slow, she reached for the magic that would unleash her wolf, give her a mouthful of sharp teeth with which to fight off this ambush, but when she saw who was straddling her frame and pinning her to the rocky ground, her shock stopped the transformation in its tracks.

"I *knew* it," Ditha panted, her silver eyes wide with triumph as she lifted one curved blade aloft. The dark steel glinted, and for a moment Lethie was convinced that the moment of her death had arrived. But instead of spilling her blood onto the jungle floor right then and there, Ditha pressed the weapon's edge hard against her throat. Lethie swallowed, feeling how sharp the blade was, knowing that if she shifted now, she'd bleed to death in less than a minute.

But Ditha wasn't alone. Lethie tensed in shock as she felt hands on her ankles, binding them tightly. Someone else seized her wrists, too, and from the rough scrape of rope she understood that she was being taken prisoner. She itched to turn her head, to see who it was that Ditha had convinced to join her in this, but she knew that any injudicious movement would see that blade cutting deeply into her throat. Lethie was

surprised—even more surprised than she had been by the ambush—to realize that she didn't want to die.

When had *that* changed, exactly?

“Speak, demon,” Ditha snapped. “Confess your foul nature.” There was a wild light in her eyes, and Lethie could feel her vindication like a physical force, an out-of-control wildfire that would undo her, if she let it. She'd underestimated this woman, she realized now. Whatever betrayal it was that lay in her past and had weakened her to Lethie's manipulations, it had also made her patient, and resourceful, and clever. How else could she have planned something like this? How else could she have brought the other contestants together without Lethie noticing? Stupid, she thought dully. Had she really believed herself to be the only one capable of scheming in secret?

The dull impact of a kick against her thigh, a muttered curse. “Speak, bitch.”

“Roda, don't. She's a prisoner.” That was Azur's voice. Lethie wondered if she'd been part of this secret little organization already when the demon attack had come. Had she hesitated for a moment before she'd moved in to save her life?

“What are you doing?” Lethie rasped. She couldn't stay silent. The situation was dire—they'd caught her in the act of summoning a demon. But it was dark out here, and she'd be very surprised if any of them actually knew what it was they were seeing. Eyewitness testimony was easily undermined. “Are you insane? There's a demon right there, it's going to kill us all—”

“Nice try,” Ditha snarled, the blade pressing a little harder against her throat. “Tuise?”

The revolting, damp sound of demon flesh giving way to a blade. Lethie felt the creature she'd drawn from the soil lose its grip on life, and the sharp stink of demon blood filled

the air as the other competitor's broadsword made short work of the beast. Tuise was here, too... did that mean...?

"That's right, demon," Ditha breathed, as though she'd read her thoughts in her face. "All five of us."

"We're all here. And we all know what you are now," came Roda's triumphant voice. Quietly, Lethie filed that piece of information away. They knew *now*... which meant that prior to this dark, confusing ambush, not all of the women had been convinced of her guilt. "What have you got to say for yourself?"

"You're making a mistake," Lethie said—then gasped for breath at the sudden impact of a boot against her ribs.

"Stop," came Azur's voice again, sharp with warning. "She's defenseless. Even prisoners have rights."

"It's not a prisoner, it's a *demon*," Roda said, disgust dripping like venom from her voice. "It's pathetic how soft you are, Azur—"

"Enough," Ditha said sharply. "None of this is helpful and we're wasting time. I've got her arms. Someone get her legs."

"Where are you taking me?" Lethie demanded, letting her voice shake with a fear that was only half feigned. Would they kill her in cold blood? Was this really how her life was going to end? Ditha's low laugh surprised her. The cruelty in it reminded her, just for a moment, of her masters.

"Weren't you paying attention? Our task was to capture a demon and bring it back alive. What a shame—looks like we're about to break your winning streak."

The trip back to camp was mercifully short. The other five contestants insisted on carrying her, though Azur pointed out that with her hands bound behind her back she could easily walk. Lethie lost herself in thought as they jostled and jolted her through the trees, mind racing furiously in the eerie calm that had fallen over her when she'd first realized what the ambush was going to mean for her future here. It wasn't over,

she knew that much. But things were definitely about to change.

There was a burst of applause when they emerged from the trees, and it was this more than the sudden brush of cooler air from the ocean that pulled Lethie out of her reflections. The applause died off almost immediately, replaced by murmurs of concern. She closed her eyes, feigning unconsciousness as she heard Ditha sharply explaining that nobody was hurt. Then they were moving again, soft murmurs of confusion surrounding them. Lethie didn't open her eyes until she heard Torren's voice, raised in thinly veiled anger, demanding an explanation from her fellow contestants. They set her down before the raised platform on which he was seated, and she let herself fall to her knees. The more wretched a sight she made, the better.

"Alpha Torren," Ditha said, offering him a formal bow. She was almost vibrating with the intensity of her feelings, but she waited for the Alpha's response regardless. Lethie let her head drop, her unfocused gaze skimming the sand...but she listened more intently than she ever had in her life.

"What's the meaning of this? Why have you abandoned the trial?" Torren's voice was calm, but she could hear the anger he was holding back, hear how worried he was about her. Would it be enough, she wondered? Enough to overrule the testimony of the five women behind her, all of whom would attest that Lethie was a demon?

"On the contrary, Alpha." Ditha's voice was clear and loud, carrying across the beach. "We have carried out the trial exactly as requested. Admittedly, we have brought only one captive demon before you, but we hope you'll understand the difficulty of the capture justifies our—group submission."

She could hear the pack murmuring in earnest now, but they quickly fell silent, perhaps at some gesture from Torren or his second-in-command. "Explain yourself," he said, his voice grating with suppressed frustration. "Now."

“Alpha Torren, the woman we’ve called Lethie is a demon,” Ditha said simply. “I’ve harbored my suspicions since her arrival among our number, and I’ve shared some of those suspicions with my fellow contestants. I never saw Lethie emerge from the portal from Halforst. Furthermore, she’s been profoundly evasive about where she lived before we met her here, and has made references to settlements that are no longer extant. I have seen her, many times, manipulate situations to her own advantage—exacerbating conflict, encouraging distrust and resentment among the contestants. I have my suspicions that she was involved in Virien’s disappearance, and I don’t believe for a moment that she came by either of her victories in the trials without demonic assistance. This, however, is all conjecture. It wasn’t until this trial that I was able to obtain incontrovertible proof—with the help of my fellow contestants,” she added. A little too late to share the spotlight, Lethie thought, sensing the steady build of resentment in a few of the other contestants. Something she could work with...provided she survived long enough, that was. The humidity was pressing down on her like a lead weight, and a few flecks of warm rain did little to alleviate the pressure.

“These are incredibly serious accusations,” Torren said, and she could hear him fighting to maintain composure. “Why is this the first we’re hearing of them?”

“I shared my concerns with your second-in-command.”

A soft cough. “I said I’d keep an eye on her.”

“Is that so?” Torren said, his voice flat and deadly. “I’ll look forward to yet another surprise report later, then?”

“There was nothing to report, boss.” Baltar was less adept than his Alpha at keeping his voice under control, Lethie was noticing. “I chalked it up to—an abundance of competitive spirit from the contestants.” A fractional pause. “I *did* mention the jealousy issue.”

“Jealousy!”

“Roda,” Ditha said sharply. But the warning went unheeded.

“Are you kidding? Jealousy! That’s—that’s an insult. Tell them, Ditha,” Roda demanded, her voice carrying across the beach with the force of her fury. “We *saw* her, Alpha. We saw her clear as day in the woods, summoning a demon! Pulling it out of the ground with her bare hands! We saw it! All five of us!”

“Pulling a demon out of the ground?” Lethie kept her face carefully blank, but the doubt she heard in his voice sent a wave of relief through her that was almost powerful enough to knock her over. “With her hands?”

“One of those nasty *buried* demons, no doubt,” Baltar said solemnly.

Ditha cleared her throat and attempted to regain control, but it was abundantly clear that her position had been weakened. “We arranged to follow her,” she pressed on. “Knowing that the trial would mean she was distracted, and knowing that the nature of the challenge would encourage her to show her true nature, we watched from a distance. We saw her consorting with demons. Then we captured her, and brought her here.”

“The journey took an hour?” The doubt in his voice had only grown stronger. Lethie could have kissed him. Ditha coughed.

“No. Our ambush took place perhaps fifteen minutes ago.”

“Well after dark, then. Are you sure—”

“I know what I saw,” Roda snapped. “We all saw it. We saw her, making a demon! Summoning it with her hands! Am I going insane? Are you not hearing what we’re telling you? She’s a demon! You invited a demon to live here with us! You had a *demon* in your tent for three nights—”

“Enough!” Torren’s voice was like a thunderclap, loud enough that Lethie couldn’t help lifting her head. His eyes met

hers for only a second, but it was long enough for the vivid anger on his face to send a chill down her spine. “I’d like to hear what the accused has to say for herself.”

“You’re going to silence me then ask a demon to speak?”

“Roda,” Ditha said through gritted teeth. “Be *quiet*.”

“Lethie? What light do you have to shed on all this?” That was Baltar, his tone artificially cheerful—she could see how hard he was working to seem unfazed. It was crucial that she play this correctly. Her mission, her future, her very life depended on exactly how she handled the next few minutes.

Lethie lifted her gaze to meet Torren’s. The humidity was wrapped around her like a clammy blanket. It was easy, far too easy, to let her eyes slide shut, to let her body sag bonelessly into the sand. And to her surprise, as thick, fat raindrops began to strike the beach around her, she felt real unconsciousness rising up to claim her.

Chapter 9 - Torren

Torren had thought he'd grown accustomed to tropical storms after three years on Kurivon. He'd even been looking forward to this one a little, keen to see how his pack would react to the wild weather once the building pressure finally broke. But this—this was beyond anything he'd seen before. Even Kurivon's worst storm paled in comparison. Was it something about Rochmar that made the weather feel like the end of the world? Or was it the accusation that had been leveled against Lethie in the handful of minutes before all hell had broken loose? No time to think about any of it. The moment Lethie passed out, it was like the sky broke open. The rain was soon roaring so loudly that conversation was impossible, and once lightning started cracking the sky open, the pack made a unanimous decision to call off the conversation until tomorrow.

But Ditha, bless her stubborn heart, insisted on getting the last word. She seized him by the wrist and leaned in to be heard above the gale, the wind not quite managing to snatch her voice away before he could make out what she was saying.

“Get a lorekeeper. Prove me wrong and I'll drop the matter.”

“In this?” he tried to shout, pointing at the sky. But Ditha was already gone, racing to help the other wolves catch a tent that had been snatched straight off the ground by the wind. Gritting his teeth, Torren took a deep breath. Brutal as this storm might be, it had nothing on the inside of his head right now.

Lethie. He scooped her listless body out of the sand, feeling her stir a little as he cradled her against his chest. She was so light in his arms. How could someone with so much strength weigh so little? How the hell could anyone imagine there was any room in that brittle bird-like frame for the heart of a demon to lurk? Irrational, maybe, but Torren allowed

himself the indulgence as he fought his way through the storm to where his tent, miraculously, remained upright. He lay her out on his bed, heedless of the wet sand that spread across his covers, then bolted back into the downpour to help his pack secure their settlement against the weather.

An hour later, drenched and utterly exhausted, he dragged himself back inside the tent. They'd managed to stop the tents from flying away into the night, which was a small mercy—the same could not be said, unfortunately, for much of the spare equipment and storage that had been left out. But the restraints on the tents had been reinforced, and everyone had somewhere safe and warm to wait out the storm, and right now, that was going to have to be enough. Torren stripped off his sopping wet clothes and wrapped himself in a towel, not sure if he was shivering more from the cold or the adrenaline.

At no point in the last hour had the subject of Lethie left his mind, even for a moment. But somehow, all that thinking had only left him more confused. He'd spent his whole life around demons—hunting them, fighting them, risking life and limb to put an end to their influence in whatever distant corner of his homeland they were lurking in. He knew demons. There was no way he could have spent the last week in close proximity to one without figuring it out. No demon could spend so much time around so many demon hunters without being caught.

But she had been caught, hadn't she? He didn't like the small, rational voice of the skeptic...but he also couldn't disagree.

“Torren?”

She was sitting up in his bed, blanket wrapped around her shoulders and a look of such bewilderment on her face that he'd taken a few steps towards her before he remembered himself and stopped in his tracks. All he wanted was to gather her into his arms until she stopped trembling like that. All he wanted was to keep her safe. The fear that had shot through him when he'd seen the others carrying her into camp like a

prisoner, hands and feet bound... Torren took a sharp breath, trying to steady his racing heart, desperate for a few seconds of clarity in the maelstrom of his thoughts.

“Is everyone safe?” she said, her voice barely carrying over the drumming of rain on the roof of the tent.

“For now,” he said, and he knew his smile couldn’t have been very convincing. “Lethie—you have to tell me what happened out there.”

She closed her eyes for a moment, and he hated himself wildly for the part he’d played in making her look so sad. “It doesn’t matter what I say.”

“Of course it does. Of course your side of the story matters.”

“Why?” Her voice was strange, cold. “A demon would say whatever it needed to say to survive. Given the accusation, you can’t trust anything I have to say.” She tilted her head, eyes suddenly harder than he’d ever seen them. She’d never looked through him like that before. “You shouldn’t even be letting me speak, Alpha. Every second you allow me to speak freely is another opportunity for me to deceive you, corrupt you, lead your pack deeper into the dark...”

“They could just as easily be lying,” he heard himself say, realizing as the words escaped him that he’d been hoping desperately for this to be the truth since Ditha had first leveled that thunderous accusation. “It would make strategic sense. A collective tactic to remove their strongest competition. Motivated perhaps in part by jealousy, about the time I’ve been spending with you.”

He’d expected to see relief on her face—or, at the very least, a hint of hope. Instead, he was stunned to see her expression darken, that habitually blank face darkened by a deeper scowl than he’d ever seen her wear. “Alpha. Five members of your pack brought you a near-stranger and swore to you they’d witnessed her consorting with demons. You’re willing to dismiss that as jealousy? As a tactic to win a *game*?”

“Those women were hand-picked by my best friend to compete for my heart and for a place in this pack,” he said, taking a few steps toward the bed. Lethie didn’t flinch. “He wouldn’t allow anyone here who wasn’t at least as competitive as I am. And in their place, I’d do whatever it took to win.”

“You’d take that risk. You’d dismiss their accusations based on...what?”

Torren opened his mouth, closed it again. Why the hell wasn’t she defending herself? Her eyes were burning through him. He’d never seen this kind of fire in her, never been on the receiving end of this terrifying force. It seemed she’d gotten over her shyness at last...why the hell did it seem like she was using her newfound confidence to try to convince him she was a demon? He ground his teeth, body tense with more than just frustration and bewilderment; he was acutely aware that he was wearing nothing but a towel around his waist, and he’d just realized that the sodden pile of clothes by the bed was Lethie’s. Nothing between their naked bodies but a couple of pieces of fabric.

And, of course, the question of whether everything he thought he knew about her was a lie.

“You,” he said at last, and it felt like his voice barely rose above the roaring of the storm outside. “Based on *you*, Lethie.” He moved closer, his body feeling strangely suspended, like he was moving through a dream. His fingertips were caressing the cool skin at her temple before he’d even realized he was lifting his hand, brushing a few grains of sand from the dark tangle of hair. Her eyes hadn’t left his and her expression hadn’t changed, but he could tell that she was holding her breath. Well, that made two of them.

“Me.” This close, her voice sounded different, somehow. Warmer. That single syllable, almost a question, felt like it sank right through his body, melting a path straight down the center of him.

“You’re no demon.” When had he sat beside her on the bed? The storm couldn’t have let up yet, but all he could hear

right now was the thud of his heartbeat in his ears. “You’re no demon,” he said again, and though he’d been trying to say it with enough force to surprise her into agreement, the words that left him were barely louder than a whisper. His fingertips had drifted past the hair at her temple somehow and he found the curve of his palm cradling her head. She wasn’t breaking his gaze, and she wasn’t pulling away...but she wasn’t saying anything, either. In that moment, Torren knew that he could spend the rest of his life dashing himself against the brick wall of her willpower, but he was never going to be able to force her to say anything she didn’t want to say. Even when the stakes were quite literally life and death.

It was rare for a demon to possess enough intelligence to imitate a wolf. It was rarer still for one to convincingly master speech. And in that moment, Torren realized in a blinding rush of pure, exultant relief that no demon could be both clever enough to have infiltrated so deeply into a wolf pack and stupid enough to sit there on his bed wearing nothing but a blanket, all the while refusing point blank to speak a single word in her own defense.

Her eyes narrowed a little—Torren realized his expression must have changed. “Nice try,” he whispered, tangling his fingers in the bewildering mess of her hair. “But I happen to be an expert on being a reckless, stubborn fool with a death wish, and no demon could ever *dream* of reaching your level. You’re a wolf to your marrow, Lethie.”

“And you’re willing to bet on that?”

“Bet my whole damn life,” he breathed, then seized her lips with his in the hopes it would silence any further disagreement.

For some reason, he’d been expecting her to freeze, for her whole body to go as still as her face did whenever he said something that she hadn’t been expecting. But it was her turn to surprise him, it seemed. She responded to his kiss with an intensity that was as immediate as it was overwhelming, and before he knew it, she’d drawn him down to the bed and they

were tangled in each other's arms, tearing into each other with a passion that was almost combative. He was stunned he'd been able to hold himself back from her this long. What exactly had been stopping him from dragging her into his tent the second he'd laid eyes on her? Everything that had held this moment back seemed laughably far away all of a sudden, the way a stress dream seemed immediately comical once you woke up and realized that none of it had been real...

Well, Lethie was real. She was more real than anything he'd ever touched, ever felt, ever breathed in. Already, his body was responding to her with more passion than he could remember feeling about even his most bragged-about conquests. He could barely remember what it had been like to hold them now, not with this woman's hands roaming across his body like she owned him.

Maybe she did. He certainly couldn't think of any objections right now.

The towel was gone. So was the blanket—he'd pushed it down from her shoulders almost the moment their lips had touched, reasoning that he could do a much better job of protecting her body from the cold. His hands stroked across her skin, tracing the fading scars of the wounds he'd dressed a few short days ago, in what already felt like another life entirely. How carefully he'd tried to maneuver her unconscious body without violating her privacy, without making any more contact with her bare flesh than was strictly necessary to care for her wounds. The way his hands had trembled with the effort of holding down the deep tide of longing in the pit of his stomach, his wolf howling with derision at his denial of his true feelings about her. He always had been too stubborn for his own good.

Well, he wasn't holding anything back right now. And neither, it seemed, was Lethie. She'd ended up on top of him as they rolled and thrashed in the blankets, and her palms were pressing hard against his chest, her lips and teeth scraping against the stubble at his jaw as she half-kissed, half-bit her curious way down his throat. How had he ever imagined that

this woman was fragile? He ran his hands over her slim arms, bronzed by the glow of the lamplight, exploring the taut muscle packed densely against her bones, caressing her wiry shoulders. The body beneath his hands was a masterpiece of efficiency. Not a single scrap of flesh went to waste...she was all muscle and tendon, built for speed and deadly accuracy. No wonder she'd beaten the other competitors so soundly in the races...no doubt they'd made the same error Torren had when they'd first looked at her. They'd mistaken her slight frame for weakness, her uneasy bearing for a lack of confidence. And when she'd beaten them, they'd opted for the only explanation that would save their wounded pride—that demonic interference was to blame. Torren couldn't help but sympathize. In their place, he'd likely have drawn the same conclusions.

But he wasn't in their place, was he? He was in bed with a woman who'd utterly absorbed him the moment he'd laid eyes on her, and he wasn't wasting another second on the laughable accusation that she was a demon. There was no way a demon could send such delightful electricity down his spine with the touch of her lips, no way a demon's body could feel so good under his hands. He ran his hands down her sides, tracing the slight flare of her waist, then softened his touch a little, grinning at the way she shivered and leaned forward a little to encourage his dancing fingers in their slow progression along her ribcage. She inhaled sharply when he caught one firm nipple between his fingers, and he froze for a moment, worried about her still-healing ribs...but then her eyes slid open with a breathless, needy sound that sent arousal through him like the blade of a knife.

Enough. His wolf was wild with impatience, his animal self tingling in every cell of his body—he couldn't remember the last time he'd felt that magic so strongly without actually shifting forms. Patience had always been his greatest weakness, and he refused to hold himself back for another minute. Taking advantage of the sensitivity he'd discovered, Torren teased at Lethie's nipple with his fingertips. With her

eyes closed, she dropped her head back with a groan, arching her back to give him better access...and reducing the ferocious pressure with which she'd been pinning him to the bed. He propped himself up on one elbow, and before she could press him back down, he leaned forward to take her other nipple between his lips.

She melted. The moan that escaped her lips was like nothing he could have imagined, least of all from the grim-faced warrior he'd come to know. Her arms fell around his shoulders and she clung to him helplessly, her cries of pleasure almost louder than the cacophonous drumming of the rain on the tent's canvas roof above them. She was too distracted by what he was doing to notice him carefully reversing their positions, and soon she was lying on her back amid the tangle of blankets, spread out beneath him, arching her back in wordless entreaty for more contact, more touch, more pleasure. How could any man deny such a pretty request? Feeling half-drunk but simultaneously more awake than he'd ever been in his life, Torren kissed a trail down the taut, shivering muscles of her abdomen, letting his breath skate across the skin of her navel. The distraction of his fingers on her nipples wasn't quite enough to stop her from realizing where he was going, and he uttered a throaty chuckle as he felt her wiry legs wrap around his chest and drag him closer to the heat of her sex.

He held back, just long enough to make a point. A few seconds, maybe even less—his lips inches from her sex, his breath skating across the slick heat of her. The power in her body was astonishing; it was taking considerable effort on his part to resist the inexorable tightening of her legs, the furious effort of her muscles to force him just those final few inches closer...but he wasn't going to give in until he'd proven he didn't have to. She needed to be reminded that she didn't have a monopoly on stubbornness.

But when her impatient growling gave way to a plaintive, desperate whimper, when her hands began clutching beseechingly at his shoulders, when her hips began to twitch

and rock helplessly up towards him, he had to give in. And when he finally buried his face in her sex and drank in the sweet taste of her, he was rewarded by the sound of her voice breathing his name like a prayer, over and over. He lost himself completely to the reverie of her body, guided by every twitch of her muscles and choked-off gasp to a deeper knowledge of what she liked, how to draw pleasure from every inch of her body. His own body was on fire with need, but there was something sharply exquisite about the contrast between his desperate, aching cock and the sounds of utter ecstasy he was drawing from Lethie's lips.

He could tell when she was close to her edge, not only by the increasingly wild sounds she was making, but by the shuddering and twitching of her body beneath his hands. He'd toyed briefly with the idea of teasing her, keeping her suspended on the edge of her climax, but had decided against the idea. It seemed cruel to taunt her like that, when she was already so utterly at his mercy...and, if he was honest, some part of him was a little frightened of what she might be capable of in the grips of such frustration. But he was surprised to feel her hands, sudden and urgent, pushing him away from her right when he'd thought he'd brought her to the point of no return. She looked like an utterly wild creature when he looked up at her, her chest heaving, body shivering and trembling...but it was her eyes that froze him solid. Deeper and darker than he'd ever seen them, her face alive with a light he'd never seen there.

His will was no longer his own. If he was honest, that had been the case for some time. Barely needing the guidance of her hands, he crawled up the bed, covering her body with his own, groaning as he felt his manhood brush against her thigh, the sensation only intensified as she pressed her scorching lips against his throat. Her legs slid around his waist, and he felt her draw herself up against him, arms tightening around his shoulders, and though he'd had every intention of maintaining his position over her, he suddenly realized that yet again, he was lying on his back beneath her.

This time, though, there would be no chance of distracting her. She was gazing down at him, her eyes hazy with desire, her lips still half-parted and flushed red. It was almost enough to distract him from the sensation in his cock... but not for long. Not when the slick heat of her sex was slowly, agonizingly engulfing him, drawing him in, drawing a broken, shuddering groan from him. His eyes rolled back in his head for a moment when she came to rest with his full length inside her... and then she was still. Every single instinct in his body was howling at him to thrust himself into her, to take hold of her hips, to wrap her in his arms and drive both of them over the edge into ecstasy. But despite the desperate yearning in every nerve of his desperate body, Torren remained absolutely, agonizingly, obediently still. His eyes were locked on Lethie's, and in that moment, he knew that if she gave the command, he'd give her his own life.

And a smile, cryptic and somehow impossibly sad, passed across her face. He might have wondered what it meant—might even have questioned her—had it not been that moment that she chose to tense the muscles of her body around his straining manhood. Whatever spell she'd cast was broken, and at her wordless urging, he lost all semblance of control, seizing her hips in his hands and driving himself into her with every scrap of strength he had left. She met every thrust with equal force, and he wasn't sure which was louder, the sound of their bodies or the sound of the bed slamming against the floor. There was no question any longer of holding back from the edge—he might as well have tried to stop the howling storm outside for all the good it would do... and when they crashed through that final barrier together, Torren couldn't differentiate her howl of utter ecstasy from his own.

Utterly spent, utterly sated, it was all he could do to gather Lethie's body against him before Torren fell into a sleep as profound and inevitable as death itself.

Chapter 10 - Lethie

It had been a long time since Lethie had awoken with a sense of peace. That should have been her first warning. But unfortunately, it was also what kept her half-drowsing for so much longer than was wise. Torren's arms were wrapped around her, warm and sure, and they felt as strong and impenetrable as the walls of a great castle. She drifted in and out of sleep, stunned by how blissful that simple luxury could be, trying not to wonder why it felt so unfamiliar because she knew it would bring reality to mind. Another few seconds, that was all she wanted...she'd face the real world once she'd lain here for another few seconds in the blissful quiet of the gentle washing of the waves on the shore and the steady rise and fall of Torren's breathing...

Quiet. Her eyes shot open, and she was on her feet in what felt like the same instant, haste making her hands clumsy as she scrambled into her clothes. Her mind was a litany of curses, all of them self-directed. How could she have been so stupid? How could she have let herself fall asleep in the arms of her enemy? How could she have been lulled into that false sense of safety when her situation had never been so dire? Why, even now, was her whole body still tingling with the memory of his hands on her?

Torren was sitting up in bed, one hand sliding automatically across the bed in the direction in which his sword lay. But the other was reaching for the place where she'd been. The look of sleepy confusion and dismay on his face made her heart twist, and she stumbled a little at the intensity of the feeling. When his silver eyes rose to rest on her face, she had to turn away from the smile that lit up his face like the sun. Had she really thought that was a good idea, last night? Had she really fallen into bed with him as a means of furthering her mission? Oh, she'd kidded herself that that was what she was doing...at least, she had at first. But the bitter truth was that she'd lost control.

And now, she knew, she was going to pay the price for it.

“You’re up,” Torren pointed out, his tone and expression clearly registering that he was speaking in protest. “And *dressed*.”

Stop looking at him, she told herself, fighting back panic at the way her eyes seemed to linger on the curve of his shoulders despite her determination to turn away. Bad enough that she’d lost control last night—worse still was the realization that she was having to fight incredibly hard to regain it. Her expression...she tried to hoist her stone mask into place, but she knew it was far too late. Torren was reaching out to her with a whimsical, beseeching look on his face, and she realized with another jolt of despair how badly she wanted to acquiesce to that wordless request.

He must have seen some of her discomfort in her face, because his expression sobered a little and he lowered his hand. “I suppose we need to talk about—all that.” One little gesture toward the door of the tent. One flick of his hand, designed to encapsulate the whole world that lay beyond this tent. Lethie’s heart was pounding so hard she felt like she might pass out. Her mind was racing as she tried to remember where they’d left things the night before. She’d won him over, she remembered that much...the triumph that had burned in her, the way it had quickly transformed to a different kind of fire altogether when he took her into his arms...

She’d won, that was the long and short of it. She’d played him like a fiddle, and she’d led him precisely to the conclusion she needed him to make. She had the Alpha of this pack in the palm of her hand, just as she’d planned. So why couldn’t she shake the fierce desire to go back in time and scrub it all out? Why, when the corruption had raged unchecked in her heart for years, was now the first time she could remember truly feeling like a monster?

“Lethie?”

She was just standing there like an idiot, she realized dully. Half-dressed, her body still warm with the aftermath of their night together, her nerve endings still humming with how it had felt when he touched her...her feet were rooted to the ground, her body locked in place as surely as if her demon masters had reached out to exert their terrible, inevitable control over her. But they hadn't. Her paralysis was all her own doing...and as if her humiliation wasn't complete, she was shocked to feel a tear spill from the corner of her eye and down her cheek.

Of course, Torren did the worst thing he could have done, which was to leap to his feet and put his arms around her. All her rigidity abandoned her, and she melted into his arms with a weakness that only intensified her self-hatred. No torment from her demonic masters had ever come close to matching this. Even their most inventive cruelties paled in comparison to how it felt to be held so closely by the man she had no choice but to betray. It was all in motion now. Soon enough, the rot would spread from her heart to his, and there was nothing at all she could do about it.

None of this was new information. This had been the plan all along. But the pain...the pain was brand new. And the pain was what she couldn't handle.

"It's alright," she heard Torren murmur against her hair. She was dimly aware he'd said it a few dozen times already, which hadn't made it any less of a lie, but the buzz of his voice was pleasant nonetheless. "It's all going to be alright, Lethie. I promise. Listen—the storm's broken. That means we can send for a lorekeeper."

"A lorekeeper?" Her voice crackled painfully in her throat—she knew her sudden urgency was the only reason she'd been able to force it to sound at all.

"I don't usually have a lot of time for magic," he admitted, his arms still tight around her. "I've always been more interested in killing demons than understanding them... which is why the pack doesn't have a resident lorekeeper. To

our detriment,” he said softly, pressing an apologetic kiss to the top of her head. “I wish I hadn’t been so short-sighted. A lorekeeper would’ve put a stop to all that fuss last night before it began.”

It was all she could do not to burst into hysterical laughter. She knew that would be the end of her. “The lorekeeper’s coming?” Did she dare to hope that he hadn’t thought to send for one yet? But her heart sank as she felt Torren nodding.

“I left instructions to send for one as soon as the storm broke. It was the only way I could get Ditha to stand down,” he added, his tone distinctly unimpressed. Lethie wondered how long his resentment of her accusers would last once Kurivon’s lorekeeper had arrived here on Rochmar. Probably about as long as it took to point at her and speak the name of the corruption at her heart. “Don’t worry,” he murmured, his arms tightening around her again as he felt her body begin to shake. “You can stay here until the lorekeeper arrives to exonerate you.”

“Right,” she heard herself say in her rusted-gate voice. “That’ll fix everything.”

A soft huff of laughter. “Maybe not,” he admitted. “I can’t imagine your fellow contestants are going to be particularly happy their scheme didn’t work.” A pause. “There’s no need for you to return to your bunk in their tent, you know. You’d be welcome to stay here. If you’re concerned about sharing quarters with the other contestants after everything that’s happened.”

It must have been nice, she thought faintly as she looked up at him. She envied him the fantasy world he was living in right now, utterly unaware of what was really going on. But she didn’t envy him the reality check that was coming. “I can take care of myself,” she retorted weakly.

She could feel the warmth of Torren’s smile beaming down on her like sunlight, and though she knew it was only going to make her feel worse, she still couldn’t resist looking

up into that impossibly handsome face. One eyebrow was lifted in amusement, and she had to fight to suppress the sudden longing she felt to reach up and kiss him. “It’s not your safety I’m worried about, Lethie,” he said, laughter dancing in his voice. “I think I know you a little better than that by now.”

That was too much. She broke away from him, hating the look of gentle hurt in his eyes, hating the whole awful situation. She paced a few helpless laps of the tent’s interior, knowing she should stay inside, knowing that there was nothing but danger out there...but as the despair rose up and threatened to choke her, she knew that anything was better than staying in this room with him for another second. At least on the beach she’d be able to see the lorekeeper coming. At least if she was outside, she’d know exactly how long she had until her entire world fell apart.

It was a small mercy that the beach was relatively empty. The sun was higher in the sky than she’d expected, and she realized that the majority of the pack was most likely out on patrol, still searching for the missing woman. Missing, most likely dead...Lethie flinched at the stab of guilt that ran through her at that thought. Her rising panic ratcheted up another few notches, solidifying into a fear that bordered on dread. Yet more evidence for her growing suspicion that sleeping with Torren had broken her somehow, done some kind of profound and lasting damage to her psyche. Yesterday, Virien’s fate couldn’t have been further from her mind. Yesterday, all she’d cared about was her mission—well, that wasn’t strictly true, but at least she’d had a handle on her feelings. But right now, it felt like every wall she’d ever built against those useless feelings had come tumbling down overnight.

It was all Torren’s fault. And the worst part was that she couldn’t even bring herself to resent him for it. Quite the opposite, in fact. One of the worst new thoughts that was tumbling around in her utterly sabotaged mind was the growing temptation to walk straight back into Torren’s tent

and tell him everything. What kind of utterly suicidal idea was that?

There was precious little in Lethie's life that she was proud of...but at least she could say that she'd been strong enough to hang onto her sanity. Through thick and thin, through years of isolation on a deserted island with a cadre of ancient demons doing everything in their power to torment her, she'd managed to defend a tiny oasis of clarity and coherence. But right now, Lethie had to face the truth. Where the demons had failed, the cocky, arrogant Alpha of this pack of adrenaline junkies had succeeded—in a single night, no less. She'd lost her mind, and he was to blame.

And as if to add insult to injury, it was in that awful moment of realization that Lethie lifted her eyes to the horizon and caught an unmistakable flash of white. The sun, reflecting from the white robes of a lorekeeper, who was sitting in the prow of a boat making its steady way toward the shore.

“It doesn't matter,” Lethie heard herself whisper aloud, though there was nobody close enough to hear her. “I'm dead anyway.”

Let the lorekeeper come, she thought. Let them reveal what she was to everyone, and let that be the end of it. The sensation was a little like relief, though a lot more like numbness—the realization that nothing could make her feel any worse than she did right now. She took a deep breath of sea air, hoping to steady herself, but instead, she was overwhelmed by the sudden, acrid reek of demonic taint, so immediate and intense that she physically flinched backwards, tripping over her feet as she did. But she didn't fall. Instead, her back struck something unpleasantly warm and misshapen, revoltingly familiar, instantly recognizable. A demon attack, in broad daylight? Without any of the camp's sentries sounding the alarm?

But the strangest thing by far about the situation was the instinct that had risen up in her, an instinct she hadn't felt since before she'd pledged herself to her demonic masters and

lost the right to call herself a wolf. It was the ancient, ancestral instinct to sound the alarm—to warn her pack that the enemy was attacking.

And in that strange, suspended moment before she was knocked unconscious, Lethie couldn't remember which side she actually belonged to.

Chapter 11 - Torren

Torren had never been so grateful to see a lorekeeper in his life. Everything seemed to happen all at once, once the dreamy spell of his night with Lethie had been broken; it was as though in the handful of seconds between her leaving the tent and him following her out, the entire world had been turned upside down. The moment he stepped onto the beach, he felt adrenaline charge his muscles and sharpen his vision, slowing time to a crawl. Two high warning howls of sentries in the trees behind him, shouts from wolves closer to the water—and the unmistakable reek of demons. Half a dozen of them on the beach already, and more visible in his peripheries, emerging from the trees. And out on the water, maybe a few hundred paces from shore, was a small boat playing host to a blur of white robes.

And by the time he'd taken all this in, Torren had already shifted. His paws struck the sand running, and he hurled himself at the nearest attacker, severing two limbs from its hideous bulk before it could even finish turning around to meet his assault. The demon's blood spilled onto sand they'd only just gotten clean, and Torren kept up the momentum, snarling his defiance as yet more demons turned to engage him. He couldn't let himself worry about why the demons were attacking in broad daylight when they were so much stronger at night, couldn't let himself worry about the lorekeeper getting safely ashore, couldn't even let himself worry about where Lethie had gone in the handful of minutes she'd been out of his sight. There were demons pouring into his pack's home base, and his only priority right now was to turn back the attack.

It would have been a longer and potentially more costly battle if it hadn't been for the lorekeeper, Torren reflected later. Wave after wave of demons poured out of the trees, Torren and his pack fighting with increasing desperation to keep them at bay. The size and strength of the attack would

have been considerable even in the demon's preferred time of darkness—given that it was broad daylight, it was downright preposterous.

But they weren't alone in the fight, to his immense relief. Adrenaline high, he turned at some point to realize that the little boat had made its way to shore, and that the white-robed lorekeeper was sprinting up the beach to join the fray. Wolf-shaped, he couldn't spare more than a glance in the woman's direction, but that was all it took to recognize an old friend. Syrra, the island's senior lorekeeper, had come in person. He'd expected her to delegate the mission to an underling—she'd been every bit as angry as her soulmate Renfrey when she'd learned about the risks Torren and his pack were taking on Rochmar. He felt a strange mixture of embarrassment and gratitude that she was here...at least, until a glancing blow from a demon reminded him that he had more important priorities for the time being.

With Syrra's help, they were able to break the back of the demonic assault, and by midday, the last of the creatures had been handily dispatched. The remnants of the beasts lay strewn across the beach, the stink of them only accentuated by the heat of the sun beating down on them, and Torren saw his pack shifting rather swiftly back to their less olfactorily gifted human shapes once the last of the surviving demons had been dealt with. Torren took a moment to balance himself on two legs again, grateful for this body's weaker sense of smell, then ran a quick headcount. About half of his pack was present, along with two of the contestants—he closed his eyes, trying to work out who had been on patrol when the attack had come, and who was still unaccounted for.

Then his eyes shot open, and he hastened across the sand, cursing his belated recognition of what was happening by the treeline.

Syrra was deep in conversation with Ditha, whose twin blades were still in her hands and dripping with demon blood. Roda was with them, her face pale and drawn with pain—he could see that Syrra's hands were on her right shoulder, and

her arm was hanging at a strange angle below it. As he watched, the lorekeeper breathed a warning, then yanked the arm sharply down and back. Roda's face went white, and a loud crack sounded, but she didn't scream, and he saw a look of tentative relief cross her face as Syrra carefully released her arm.

"Nicely done, Senior Lorekeeper," he said with a nod as he joined the trio, wishing he'd gotten here sooner. How much had Ditha told Syrra about the situation with Lethie? What, exactly, had she said? And where was Lethie, anyway? He hadn't seen her since the chaos of the battle had engulfed the camp, and though he knew she could take care of herself, he could still feel worry drumming a tattoo against his chest. After how good it had felt to wake with her in his arms, the rest of the day had left a lot to be desired.

"Seems I timed my arrival well," Syrra was saying, her attention still focused on Roda. She had her hands resting gently on the shorter woman's injured shoulder and her eyes closed, and Torren could just make out a faint glow of light around her fingertips. She smiled with relief at whatever she'd found, and opened those strange blue eyes. "All good. It's settled in cleanly, nothing trapped between the joint and the bone—but it'll still need rest," she added sharply, underlining the warning with a light tap on Roda's uninjured arm. "No lifting or carrying for at least a day."

"Yes, Lorekeeper," Roda said obediently, though he could see her chafing at the restriction.

"Wolves," Syrra said with a roll of her blue eyes. "I'll never get used to your expectations around timeframes. A day is nothing. If it was my shoulder that was dislocated it'd take two *weeks* to heal."

"Your patience humbles us," Torren said, trying to smile. Unlike the vast majority of Kurivon's residents, Syrra wasn't a wolf. Though she'd been born and raised in Halforst, she was restricted to her two-legged form, much as the humans of this world were. Her aptitude for magic, however, was

unsurpassed, and her specialization in healing and protective magic had saved the lives of the wolves of Kurivon more times than Torren could count.

“Now then,” she said, and though her friendly tone hadn’t changed, there was a sudden gravity in her bearing that made him attend her words closely. “Why don’t we talk about this demon?”

Torren couldn’t stop the burst of irrational, defensive anger that flared up in him—all he could control was his response. He managed to stop himself from snapping back a defensive rejoinder, but he was too slow to stop the sharp look he shot at Ditha, who returned his gaze coolly. He became aware that Syrra, too, was watching him closely, and he forced himself to breathe.

“Certainly,” he managed, hoping his voice didn’t betray his anger. “But in the interests of having a productive conversation, I think we ought to take some care with the words we use. I’m guessing Ditha and Roda have filled you in on what they think they saw last night?”

“Think...!” The look on Roda’s face told him that if the slight woman had had the power to kill him with a look, he’d be as dead as the half-rotted demon carcass ten feet from where they stood. But it was clear from the furious, tense silence she maintained that Ditha had had some serious words with her the night before, and though she clearly wanted to, she didn’t say another word. Syrra glanced first at Roda, then at Torren, then sighed.

“One of those situations, is it? I see. Is there somewhere we can sit?” A breeze from the sea lifted her hair, and she wrinkled her nose. “Perhaps upwind of the demon corpses?”

The podium seemed as good a place as any to sit with the Lorekeeper; close to the water as it was, the reek of rotting demons was kept largely at bay, and the platform was wide enough for them all to sit. Baltar, who’d always had a good instinct for when it was best to keep out of the way when he

chose to listen to it, took the rest of the pack into the jungle in the interests of picking off any wounded stragglers from the retreating force that had attacked that morning. That was likely where Lethie was, Torren told himself firmly, trying not to let himself worry at the realization that she wasn't among the wolves on the beach. It was probably a good thing that she was making herself scarce. Better out there, scouting for demons, than risking getting tied up by the other contestants and dragged before the lorekeeper like some kind of prisoner. He had no doubt that that was what was on Ditha's mind—he wasn't the only one scanning the beach uneasily, looking for Lethie's distinctive frame...

Syrra listened attentively to Ditha's side of the story, and Torren devoted every scrap of willpower at his disposal to not interrupting to object or correct her version of events. Instead, he stared at the beach behind them, watching the treeline, trying to decide whether he'd feel more relieved or anxious if Lethie emerged from the jungle right here and now.

"Torren? Do you have something to add to Ditha's account of events?" Syrra's tone was neutral and friendly, but he still had to work hard to swallow his defensiveness. Ditha had offered a reasonably accurate recounting of the conversation they'd had the night before, before the storm had broken out, and he was struggling to think of what more he could add.

"Senior Lorekeeper, I don't know what more can be said." He saw Ditha stiffen in his peripheral vision. "Yes, I have eyewitness testimony from five wolves, who watched on, in full darkness, as their competitor...what was she doing? Stroking a demon with her bare hands?"

"She was sculpting it—"

"She pulled it out of the ground—"

"Please," Syrra said softly, but it cut both women off as surely as a shout would have. "Let the Alpha finish."

“Thank you, Lorekeeper. I have taken these allegations very seriously. I gave the instruction for a lorekeeper to be sent for as soon as the weather permitted, and I took the accused contestant into my own custody. I would hate for anyone to conclude that I haven’t taken every precaution in the event that this accusation is true. However,” he added, laying enough emphasis on the word to stop Roda from bursting out with whatever indignant retort had been brewing. “By the same token, I hesitate to punish a wolf whose guilt is not certain. And I can’t overlook the possibility—however slight—that these five women are not telling the truth. I have it on good authority that they have disliked Lethie since meeting her. There is a strong competitive spirit in this group—a quality I usually hold in high regard—but I’m concerned it has manifested in resentment of the clear frontrunner in the competition.”

“How dare you,” Ditha said, her flat tone belying the fury in her eyes. “How dare you accuse me of—”

“I haven’t accused anyone of anything, actually,” Torren snapped. “I am doing everything I can to resolve the matter fairly—”

“Like sleeping with the enemy?” Roda demanded hotly, losing control. “The nerve of you, calling it ‘taking her into custody.’ Where is she now, huh? If you took what we’d said so seriously, why’d you let her get away? Maybe she’s not the only one who’s got demonic rot in her bones—”

“Roda!” Ditha’s voice rang out like the crack of a whip. Roda covered her face with her hand, muttering an immediate retraction, but the damage was well and truly done.

“Thank you both for speaking with me,” Syrra said into the thunderous silence that followed. “I think I’d best discuss the matter with the Alpha alone.”

Torren watched Ditha and Roda stalk off across the beach, the taller woman’s strides carrying her so quickly that Roda was forced to jog to catch up. There was a long silence, broken only by the gentle lapping of the water against Syrra’s

little boat, which was still resting on the sand where she'd left it.

“So,” she said finally, her voice cheery and bright. “I trust the Soulmate Games are going well?”

After more than a decade of Baltar's constant barbs, Torren prided himself on having a fairly thick skin—but he hadn't expected to be sucker-punched by the Senior Lorekeeper. He was surprised by the weary laugh she startled out of him, and he pushed his hair out of his face, feeling a little of the stiff, formal Alpha demeanor leaving him. “I deserved that.”

“You certainly did.” Syrra smiled, but her sharp blue eyes didn't leave his face. “Is there anything you want to tell me about this woman, now that we're alone?”

He wavered for a long moment. He was exhausted from the battle, wired from the after-effects of adrenaline, deeply worried about the civil war that was brewing among the wolves under his command, and above all, terrified that something had happened to Lethie. The idea of just spilling his guts to Syrra right here and now was very, very tempting...if only because it would mean relieving some of the pressure of keeping it all inside his head.

But then he remembered how high the stakes were. Five people were accusing Lethie of being an agent of demonic corruption, and as far as he knew, he was the only one who knew her well enough to speak in her defense. If he told Syrra about the night that the two of them had shared, or about the feelings for her that had been building in intensity since the day he'd first set eyes on her, or about the way she'd given him cause to doubt his long-held conviction that the soulmate bond simply wasn't in his future...well, he'd be tanking any credibility he had, that was for sure. Best case, she'd think he wasn't objective. Worst case...well, worst case, she might come to suspect that he'd been subjected to demonic corruption, too. And that would spell disaster, not only for him

and his tenure as Alpha of this pack if word got around, but for Lethie, too. She needed him in her corner right now.

And so he shrugged, lifting his hands to the sky in a helpless gesture that won a tired smile from Syrra. “Nothing that hasn’t been said already. She’s cryptic, and a little odd, and kind of intense, but...” He exhaled. “A demon? I just don’t see it, Syrra. And you know how much experience I’ve had on that front.”

“I don’t doubt your intuition, Torren. It’s kept you alive all these years, hasn’t it?”

“Despite my best efforts, yes,” he said, feeling his cocksure grin springing to his face with a little of his old ease. “And as much as inviting a demon to compete in my Soulmate Games would be an extremely funny story...I don’t think that’s what’s happening here.”

“You really think your other competitors got together and came up with a lie like that?”

“I don’t know.” That part had been troubling him a little. Even if he could believe that all five of them would be willing to stand behind a false accusation with potentially fatal consequences, he’d now heard the story multiple times, and he was yet to see any evidence in any of their body language that they were lying. “I’m usually pretty good at picking up when someone’s telling the truth—or thinks they are, anyway.”

“And?”

“And they seem solid.” He didn’t like admitting it. “But...I mean, you heard what they said. Pulling a demon out of the ground? That’s not how any of that works.”

Syrra hesitated for a moment, then drew something from the folds of her robe. He recognized the weapon—a long-bladed dagger, its hilt thickly engraved with the runes that were a lorekeeper’s badge of office. Without looking at him, she shifted forward a little, until she was sitting on the edge of the raised platform upon which they were sitting. Then, she lowered the tip of the blade until it was touching the sand.

There was a sudden reek of sulfur. The hilt of the dagger was glowing, and Torren watched with undisguised fascination. It was rare to see a lorekeeper actually working their magic like this. The sand around the blade was turning black, and almost seemed to be bubbling like liquid on the boil...and he watched with a mixture of revulsion and awe as Syrra lifted the knife, drawing a great globule of viscous black sludge up and out of the pristine white sand. He leaned closer—then recoiled with disgust when he realized that the goop was stirring and twitching. Its surface rippled and shifted, and then suddenly parted, revealing a dull red, horribly familiar glow. Torren’s hand flew to the dagger at his belt, but before he could drive his blade through that monstrous eye, Syrra’s grip on her weapon shifted, and the runes lit up with a vivid white light. The ball of sludge suspended at its tip shuddered—then dropped lifelessly to the sand, already beginning to disintegrate.

“That’s demon flesh,” Torren breathed. He’d put an end to enough demons to be intimately familiar with the way their bodies rotted once the life had left them. “How the hell did you do that?”

“A trick I learned from an old friend,” she said quietly, her eyes far away. When Syrra referred to old friends, she was usually talking about Kurivon’s previous settlement—of which she was the only survivor. “If there’s enough demonic taint in the soil, a demon can be drawn from it. Manifested.”

He’d been so shocked by the display of magic that he’d almost forgotten what it meant. His heart sank as his thoughts finally caught up. “You’re saying it’s possible they’re telling the truth.” Syrra only nodded. She was fussily cleaning the scorched demon blood from the tip of her blade, but he could tell that her attention was still focused intently on him. He had to be careful, here. He couldn’t rush too quickly to Lethie’s defense. “I’ve never seen a demon pull another demon out of the ground. Can they all do that?”

“No,” Syrra said softly. “Only the very powerful ones can manifest weaker ones. Foot soldiers, in a way.”

He didn't like that at all. "Okay, but not only powerful demons, if there are lorekeepers who can do it too," he heard himself point out, his voice a little more defensive than he intended. "Is that the complete list of possibilities? While we're brainstorming for possible explanations for what these women may or may not have seen her doing out there?"

"I'll need to talk to all five of them, I think," Syrra said matter-of-factly. "A description of the demon will help narrow down exactly what mechanism she used to manifest it."

"*Allegedly* manifest it," he said, wishing he didn't sound like a petulant child. "We still only have their word to go on that any of this happened at all."

"That's true," Syrra allowed. "Which brings me to my next question, Torren. Where exactly is this woman? Still in your tent, I'm assuming? Have you checked on her since the battle?"

Torren gritted his teeth. "She was outside when the attack came," he said reluctantly. "I—lost track of her, after that."

"I see," Syrra said softly. Her tone was level, as neutral as water, but to Torren's ears her words still had the unmistakable ring of a death sentence. "Well. I hope she turns up soon, for her sake."

And for mine, Torren thought, dread sinking like a stone into the pit of his stomach.

Chapter 12 - Lethie

“You betrayed us,” the archdemon hissed yet again. Its acrid, stinking breath had made her flinch the first few times it had spat its accusations in her face, but she was adjusting quickly. She was becoming an old hand at this, she thought with a grim kind of whimsy. Why was she always closest to laughter when things were at their most dire? This was taking gallows humor to a whole new level.

Her memory was patchy, which made it hard to tell how much time had actually passed since the demons had launched their surprise attack on the camp. One moment she'd been blinking in the sunlight on the beach, the next she'd been blinking up at the blue sky through the branches as she was dragged at top speed through the jungle by dozens of misshapen, bulbous hands. Any hope of escaping her captors had been swiftly doused by another blow to the head, and when she'd woken in darkness it was with the sickly, lurching sensation of poison throbbing through her system. As if knocking her out by blunt force hadn't been enough, it seemed they'd opted to drug her too, just for good measure.

That particular aspect of the plan had backfired a little, however. She'd only regained consciousness halfway through the diatribe she was currently listening to, though she'd been swaying on her feet when she woke...had her demon masters thought she was conscious enough to absorb what they were telling her? So much for their ability to see deeply into her mind, she thought crossly. Most likely they simply didn't care whether she was listening or not. They were angry with her, which meant they were going to scold her for as long as they felt inclined, consciousness be damned.

Lethie tried, subtly, to take stock of her situation, now that her mental clarity had more or less returned. The darkness was thick enough to make her doubt she'd ever been able to see at all, a familiar sensation that told her she was deep in the

cave system at Rochmar's diseased heart, and the whispering, furious presence of her archdemon masters was enough context for her to fill in the rest of the gaps in her memory. The attack had been a smokescreen. They'd decided to pull her out, and here she was. She'd barely been conscious of the journey, let alone able to resist the extraction. So much for her mission. So much for her pale dream of freedom.

Why didn't she feel worse about this? This ought to have destroyed her. Hadn't that been her first fear, when they'd sent her out? That she'd fail, and they'd yank her and her fragile hope back down into the darkness? Hadn't she known this would crush her to death? Yet here she stood on her four paws, thoroughly uncrushed...a thought flickered to life, and against her better judgment, she ran a quick scan of her body, already bracing herself for what she might find. But her body was intact. Two ears, a jaw full of teeth, a thick pelt (in considerably better condition than her tangled mass of human hair, she might add) and four paws beneath her...she even gave her tail a few wags, feeling it swipe against a rocky outcrop behind her.

She was still wolf-shaped. And that could only mean one thing. They weren't finished with her yet. No matter how much they might rail and seethe about her betrayal, the fact that she hadn't been slammed straight back into a repulsive, shambling demon body meant that sooner or later, they were going to send her back out there. The giddy rush of triumph faltered and died almost immediately when she considered the full ramifications of that prospect. Sure, it would be grand to get out of this dank, stinking cave so thick with demon taint she could barely breathe. But when she got out there, who would be waiting for her?

Torren. Torren, with that arrogant little smirk and his stupid hair in his face as though he didn't pay careful and close attention to making it fall exactly the way he liked it. Torren, with his surprisingly gentle hands and his deceptively insightful mind. Torren, no doubt with a list of questions the

length of his arm, none of which she was going to be able to answer without breaking his heart into a thousand pieces.

It would be better if she just disappeared, she realized, there in the darkness. It would be a better outcome for the pack, at least, if they never saw her again. Sure, the other contestants would likely remember her as an evil monster, but at least they'd be alive to do so. And Torren...she didn't like the way her heart seemed to lose its rhythm whenever she thought of him, especially because it was growing harder and harder to keep him from her thoughts for any length of time. Torren would be alright, she told herself firmly. No doubt he'd mourn her absence, maybe even wonder for a while about where she'd gone...but he'd be better off without her. Everyone would.

Except her, of course. There was a low, unpleasant hissing in the cave around her, growing in volume as it echoed off the unseen walls, and Lethie realized with an uneasy jolt that it seemed to be a response to her train of thought. Without warning, something struck her hard across the face, leaving a damp, stinging residue where it had made contact.

"Traitor," came the demon's whispering voice, louder this time, and though she knew it was the rot at her heart that was translating its meaning, she almost fancied she could hear the syllables of the words echoing from the stone walls. "Weak, pathetic traitor, to squander our gifts, to waste your opportunity at freedom."

There can be no freedom, Lethie thought dully. Not for me.

"Peace, then," the demon said impatiently. "The solitary death you crave. You desire it still."

They weren't wrong. Lethie thought for a moment about the tiny islands off Rochmar's coast, about the dream she'd allowed herself of living out her days there. Strange, how that dream had lost some of its sparkle since she'd last been down here. What had changed?

“You will return.” Lethie was shocked to hear something in her master’s voice she’d never heard before—faint, but unmistakable, a trace of uncertainty. “You will return to the wolves on the beach! You will continue your work!”

Lethie took a deep breath as she prepared herself to shift, wondering if her masters would intervene. The flare of magic that moved through her earned her a noisy chorus of hissing and snarling from her demonic audience, but she made it safely to her two-legged form. The darkness was just as impenetrable and absolute to her human eyes, but she blinked a few times out of habit. It felt strange, to be in her most vulnerable body down here in the most dangerous part of the entire island. But right now, she needed her voice.

“No,” she said, immediately taken aback by how loudly the single syllable echoed. “I refuse.”

Lethie braced herself, expecting a howling cacophony of objections. The eerie, utter silence that descended instead came as a surprise. Lethie waited in the darkness, a little shocked that they’d let her speak...more shocked, truly, that she’d found the strength to speak at all. And for the first time in a long time, she realized she’d done something her demonic masters hadn’t been able to predict. Well, she thought faintly, she supposed that made sense, given that her refusal to serve had come as a surprise to her as well. She was surprised she’d even been physically capable of voicing that denial. The demonic corruption that encircled her heart was still every bit as present as it had been since she’d given up her freedom in exchange for her life, all those years ago.

Was it possible, somehow, that she’d overestimated just how much control her demonic overlords could actually exercise over her? Or had something changed?

The silence yawned and stretched for longer than she could have imagined. She’d begun to suspect that this was some new prank they were playing on her—that she was standing to attention in an empty room, imagining an audience of captors who simply weren’t there. But eventually, the voice

sounded once more, every bit as haughty and disinterested as it ever had been.

“Your failure does not surprise us. Nor do we have any further need of you.”

“Oh, sure,” she heard herself say, a little shocked by her own insolence. “You didn’t need me at all—that’s why you went to all the trouble of sending me down there? And the small army you sent to pull me back out, that had nothing to do with needing the information I gathered, right?”

“Your arrogance was your undoing,” her master hissed, “just as it will be the undoing of your fellow vermin on that beach. Your usefulness to us is woeful in its limitation. We have already extracted all we need from you. You ought to grovel in gratitude that we suffered you to live this long.”

“So kill me,” she said, surprised by how level her voice was. “If I’m so useless to you, if you truly have no need for me, why bother keeping me alive?”

The silence was back. This time, it only lasted a few seconds—but it was still long enough for Lethie to wonder if these were her last few minutes alive. For as long as she could remember, she’d fought tooth and nail to stay in this world, whatever the cost. Her earliest memory was of scrambling through a battlefield, barely old enough to hold up her own head but knowing instinctively that she had to keep moving if she wanted to live. Later, the Council lorekeepers would tell her that that determination had saved her life, that they never would have imagined that there were any survivors in the burned-out ruins of the town had they not spotted that infant, crawling for her life. Every decision she’d made since then had been in pursuit of that same, simple goal. She’d studied, she’d trained, she’d learned everything the Council could teach her about keeping herself safe from the demons that had almost claimed her young life before it could begin. She’d been a good soldier. Better than most, some would say...but a better soldier would have died with her comrades all those years ago. A true soldier wouldn’t have been tempted by the

demons' meager offering—a lifetime of servitude, in exchange for a stay of execution, a half-life serving at the beck and call of wolfkind's most hated enemy. But Lethie had never been a true soldier. She'd just worn the armor for a while. What she was, at the end of the day, was a survivor. So why, for the first time in her life, did the prospect of dying hold a strange shadow of relief?

Because if she was dead, she realized with an awful burst of clarity, she couldn't do any more harm to Torren and his pack.

The demons didn't answer her question, in the end—not in words, at least. Lethie hardly noticed as they dragged her off into the impenetrable darkness, too lost in her own racing thoughts, in the strange, deeply alien realization that there was, in fact, something she might just be willing to die for. It wasn't until she realized that the darkness was fractionally less absolute that she was able to pull herself out of her own head and observe what was going on. Were they returning her to the surface? Surely not—the air around her was still so thick with advanced demonic taint that it was almost a physical presence. On the way out of the caves, it grew easier and easier to breathe. If anything, she was being dragged deeper into the island's heart, deep enough to feel the dull heat of the volcano's molten heart emanating up through the rock.

Demons had no use for even this much light, she thought, blinking suspiciously as her eyes strained to see through the near-total gloom. There was nothing down here that cast light even incidentally. If there was light this deep in the mountain, she knew, it had been put there intentionally, for the benefit—or the torment—of a creature that relied on its eyes in a way demons simply didn't. A horrible suspicion was beginning to dawn on Lethie, a possibility that she'd been doing her level best not to think about.

There was no reaction to the light from the demon that was half-dragging, half-escorting her...or was it multiple demons? It was hard to tell at the best of times, with their

plurality of limbs and lack of common features, and the darkness was usually an insurmountable obstacle to any further study—but right now, she could make out the outline of the lumpy, misshapen limbs that were pushing and shoving her down the hallway, even see the light glinting from a few jagged teeth. Wherever they were taking her, they'd chosen to light it. And when they rounded a bend in the long corridor they were traversing, Lethie's awful suspicions were confirmed.

The demons had hewn a prison from the rock. They'd done a laughably bad job, of course, but she could recognize the intended function of the handful of makeshift cells that had been constructed. Sharp claws had sliced several deep recessions into the stone along this particular section of corridor, leaving enough rock behind to form crude bars. They shoved her into one of these strange recessions in the rock, the freshly-cut floor jagged and uneven beneath her feet. She was still blinking as her eyes worked to adjust to the dull light in this part of the corridor, preoccupied by a banal curiosity about what it was that was actually casting the light. Had they stolen a lantern from the wolves, perhaps? She turned to ask her captors, but they were already gone, the faint scrape of demonic limbs against the stone receding into the background.

Lethie moved to the bars of her cell, curious about how a cage with no door was supposed to keep her inside—only to realize with a shudder of revulsion that she'd made a slight error regarding the construction of the cells. Her little prison had been hollowed out of the stone, that much was true, but she'd been wrong about the demons leaving enough stone to form bars. The barrier to her escape was a dull, glistening black, and when she lifted a tentative hand to touch one, she felt an immediate burning sensation on her fingertips and snatched her hand back with a quiet curse. The 'bars' twitched and writhed at her touch, thickening for a moment as if in warning.

"How creative of you," she whispered, feeling sick to her stomach. She always hated it when her masters got clever.

The cells were stone, but the bars were composed of living demonflesh.

But they wouldn't have gone to all this trouble just to impress her. Lethie had long since stopped reacting with anything other than dull resignation to their awful little experiments—a side effect, she'd always assumed, of the demonic rot that was wrapped around her heart. This revolting little jail was for the benefit of someone else. And she had a suspicion she knew exactly who she was going to see when she looked through the bars of the cell opposite hers.

It was clear that the captive hadn't gone down without a fight. Lethie could see the half-healed wounds on her arms and hands, deep and vicious, and that mane of blonde hair was still streaked with dark brown clumps of dried blood, which suggested they'd had to knock her out before they'd dragged her down here. The fact that she was in her human body spoke volumes about how badly she'd been injured—no wolf would have opted to inhabit their more vulnerable form in captivity unless they were in sore need of its more advanced healing capabilities.

Virien was sitting as close to the bars of her cell as she could without making contact with the slimy ropes of demonic flesh. She was only a few feet away, and Lethie could only imagine how angry she must be with her. She braced herself for all her fellow contestant's fury as she finally forced herself to look at her face...but what she saw in those silver eyes was far, far worse than anger.

Virien had burned like a torch when Lethie had first met her, strength and vitality emanating from every pore. She remembered how brightly her silver eyes had shone on the mountaintop, the sharp intelligence that had gleamed in those depths. Virien had been the first of the other contestants to suspect her, and looking at her now, Lethie knew she'd paid an awful price.

Those once-bright eyes were staring into the middle distance, dull and utterly lifeless. If it hadn't been for the slight

rise and fall of her shoulders, Lethie might have suspected she was looking at a propped-up corpse. Virien hadn't reacted at all to the arrival of a second prisoner—didn't seem to recognize that there was anyone else there at all, let alone the woman who'd gotten her into this mess in the first place. Lethie knew she should feel relieved that Virien was so far gone, but all she felt was a dull, awful, sick feeling in the pit of her stomach. She called Virien's name, gently at first, repeating it over and over in the hopes of seeing some flicker of life in those awful, empty eyes. At some point, when the demon flesh bars began to vibrate before her eyes, she realized she was screaming. But no matter how much she screamed, there was no response from her fellow captive. Only those dull, unseeing eyes...the unmistakable sign of the onset of demonic corruption.

Lethie dropped to her knees in the cell, arms wrapped around her shaking body, and wept for the first time in as long as she could remember.

Chapter 13 - Torren

“We should’ve had a lorekeeper years ago,” Baltar confided in him at the end of that first long day of searching for their missing prisoner. They were sitting by the firepit after a long, rather subdued family meal, which had been attended by everyone on the island, pack members and contestants alike. Syrra had been the guest of honor. His pack had warmed to her quickly, especially once she’d cracked a few deeply dorky jokes to undermine the sense of formality her lorekeeper’s robes seemed to create. Torren managed a weary smile for Baltar’s sake.

“Couldn’t find one stupid enough to risk spending too much time with us,” he pointed out, only half joking. He’d been both surprised and humbled by the offer Syrra had made that evening at dinner to stay with them for a few days and help as much as she could in her capacity as a lorekeeper. It had been a welcome piece of good news after a deeply awful day. First the surprise attack, then the dreadful conversation about Lethie, who was still missing. A little more information had come to light regarding that, at least, though he wasn’t sure if it made him feel better or worse—a few of his wolves had caught a glimpse of her unconscious form being dragged into the jungle by a cluster of demons. The general assumption was that she’d been kidnapped from where Torren had been holding her captive in his tent. Torren hadn’t been about to correct them, and though he’d felt Syrra’s watchful eyes on him, she hadn’t said anything either.

“That explains it. They’re all too smart to throw in their lot with us.” Baltar sighed. “It’s good of her to help us, given...well, the general vibe.”

Torren snorted. “You mean, the general vibe of ‘to hell with the Alphas, it’s our island and we’ll party however we like’?”

“Mm. Whoever gave you that advice was a fool.” A pause. “You were twice the fool for listening to him, though.” That, Torren knew, was as close as Baltar would ever get to an apology—or an admission that he’d been wrong.

“Well, you know me. If I’m going to be a fool, I’m going to be the biggest, dumbest fool in all the world.”

“Above and beyond, that’s my Alpha.” Baltar clapped him on the back. “I’m destroyed, buddy. Gonna go pass out for a bit before dawn patrol. Promise me you’ll get at least a few hours?”

Torren nodded his agreement. He knew he’d need rest if he was going to have any luck searching this wretched island for the missing prisoner. But when he reached his bed and realized that the tangled bedclothes still smelled faintly of Lethie, he had a feeling he was going to have a lot of trouble keeping that promise.

A long, restless night followed. Torren tossed and turned like the waves crashing on the beach, occasionally drifting into a shallow half-asleep state in which he dreamed he was trying to run at full speed through the jungle, held back with every step by vines and branches that reached out to ensnare his feet. He’d reach down to yank them away, only to realize that they weren’t roots or vines, but tendrils of demon flesh that stuck to his skin like glue. All the while he could hear Lethie’s voice calling his name, hoarse and desperate, seemingly only a few feet up ahead in the trees...but every time he got free for long enough to sprint up ahead, all he found was more jungle, more demonic tendrils hanging down from more misshapen trees. It was almost a relief to realize that dawn had come and he could give up on the futile effort of trying to sleep. How could he get any rest when Lethie was out there somewhere, imprisoned, alone? His mind was too full of worry for her...and questions about what the hell was going on between them. He’d thought he’d known, for a moment. How stupid could one man be?

Baltar had been right about the lorekeeper. By midday on that first day of searching, his pack were just about ready to appoint Syrra as Alpha of the pack instead. With just a few murmured words and some painted runes, the lorekeeper imbued his pack's weapons with a protection spell. Most of them had exchanged skeptical glances, but it didn't take long for the efficacy of the magic to be made clear. Every patrol returned, exultant about how much ground they'd been able to cover, how infrequently they'd been bothered by demons, how easy the weapons had made it to dispatch the handful that did engage with them—and Syrra was soon surrounded by a gaggle of curious wolves wherever she went, eager to learn anything they could about how her magic worked.

Torren didn't begrudge them their enthusiasm. It was a welcome distraction, given what was a rather grim task; they were searching for two missing people now, not just one, and Torren knew that most of the pack accepted that they were most likely looking for bodies, not living wolves. It wasn't something he would allow himself to consider, however. Wherever Lethie was, she was alive. He wouldn't entertain any other possibility. She was alive, and she was out there, and when he found her, he was going to shake her by the shoulders until she told him once and for all what was going on. And after that...well, after that, they'd see.

He hadn't told anyone what had happened between them on the night before she'd disappeared, and the weight of that secret was weighing on him terribly. He had never felt the need to keep anything from his pack before. He'd always prided himself on his integrity, on his willingness to share even his insecurities and mistakes with the members of his pack, knowing they were the best people in the world to hold him accountable for overcoming his weaknesses. But were his feelings about Lethie a weakness? He hated to think that way, even for a moment. In his heart, in his bones, he knew that what they'd shared that night had been sacred. And he knew that if anyone else said anything to the contrary, he wouldn't be able to stop himself from flying off the handle. It was that,

more than anything, that scared him into maintaining his silence. He'd always been reckless, always a little too brave for his own good, always been compelled by a competitive spirit to keep honing a talent that had come with a considerable helping of arrogance. But for all his flaws, he'd never genuinely felt that he wasn't in control of himself. Not until he'd met Lethie.

Right now, in the midst of all this trouble and uncertainty, his pack needed him to be strong. This was no time to share his creeping worry that he'd contributed to that chaos.

Instead, he threw himself into the search effort. With Syrra's help, they made considerable inroads on exploring the island. Their focus was on searching for the missing contestants, of course, but they took the opportunity to add to their maps of the island as they went. Discoveries included a valuable source of freshwater in the form of a half-hidden stream a few hundred paces from camp—much easier than their existing method of sending a boat back to Kurivon every other day to refill their containers from that island's river. They found quite a few hidden cave entrances, too, which were worth keeping a close eye on. Torren had long suspected that Rochmar's cave system had something considerable to do with its incredibly powerful demon population, and when he ran the theory by Syrra, she agreed.

“That absolutely doesn't mean you should go in there, by the way,” she added quickly, pointing the sheathed tip of her dagger at him in warning. “I've come to accept your recklessness, Torren, but I draw a firm line at suicide.”

“We've got plenty of jungle to get through first, Senior Lorekeeper, don't you fret,” Baltar had chimed in, but he'd tipped Torren a wink that had forced him to hide a laugh behind his hand.

It was four days after Lethie's disappearance that they got their first piece of good news. Torren had just returned from a particularly exhausting trek along the very edge of the

jungle, where the trees gave way to the craggy slopes that lead towards the central volcano's peak. It had been slow, tedious going, and he'd come back yet again with nothing to show for it. To make matters worse, one of the patrols was late back. They'd been due more than an hour ago, and he could feel how worried the rest of the pack were. They couldn't afford to lose another member, he thought, his eyes resting on the trio of wolves at the edge of the water. Any sense of separation between the contestants and the members of the pack had vanished long ago. Something about fighting off multiple demon attacks together had given every wolf on the island a sense of shared purpose. If there was anyone on the island who felt estranged from the pack right now, it was Torren.

He'd just decided to push that grim thought firmly out of his head when he heard the shouts. Old habit had him tensing himself for battle, adrenaline flooding his system as his instincts readied him for yet another ambush—down by the water, he could see the other wolves doing the same. But when the wolves who'd shouted emerged from the treeline, one look at their faces told him there was no need for the sword in his hand right now. He recognized the pair as the scouts who'd been late to return, but that relief was quickly outshone when he realized who they were carrying between them, one of each of their arms slung under her shoulders for support. Her blonde hair was lank and tangled, her clothing stained with dirt and drying blood, and her face lined with exhaustion—but she was alive.

Later, he'd look back with considerable self-loathing to remember the brief second he spent wishing that it was Lethie and not Virien that his wolves had brought back to camp. But the screams of disbelief and sheer delight quickly distracted him, and it wasn't long before the whole pack had come running to celebrate what seemed like a miracle. Torren hung back, letting the pack savor this moment of joy. They needed a win. They deserved it, after everything they'd been through lately.

“She’ll make a full recovery,” Syrra told him a few hours later, emerging from the tent where they’d settled Virien in to recover from her ordeal. “She’s badly undernourished and dehydrated, which might have something to do with why those wounds have healed so slowly, but she’s strong enough to bounce back physically.”

It sounded like good news, but Syrra’s tone was heavier than he liked. He glanced over his shoulder towards the water’s edge, where the pack had built a celebratory bonfire in honor of Virien’s miraculous safe return. Baltar had promised a bigger celebration once Virien was strong enough to join them; he was already talking about requesting special supplies from Kurivon, the uneasy relationship with the Council of Alphas clearly forgotten in the excitement. Syrra nodded quietly and led him without a word in the opposite direction, towards a quiet place at the treeline where they wouldn’t be overheard. The last of the light of sunset was draining from the sky, but he could still see her face well enough in the gloom to know she was deeply worried.

“Right,” he said softly. “Tell me why you look so stressed out about a wolf who’s going to make a full recovery.”

“Did you see her eyes?” Torren shook his head. He’d barely gotten a glimpse of Virien before the rest of the pack had rushed in, and he’d decided against crowding around her bedside until Syrra had had a chance to examine her. Syrra sighed. “They were very dull. Almost gray, I’d say.”

Torren frowned. “Is that a sign of dehydration, or something?”

“This pack really needs a lorekeeper,” Syrra said with another heavy sigh. “It’s one of the indicators of advanced demonic taint in a wolf, Torren.”

“Right,” he said, a little defensively. “I think I remember hearing something about that.” Truthfully, it wasn’t a subject he’d ever been particularly interested in. When it came to fighting demons, he specialized in the kind that

couldn't be mistaken for anything else. Ten feet tall, hundreds of horrible limbs, poison spraying from every orifice—that kind of demon. The kind that took parasitic hold in the hearts of unwary wolves, those just gave him the creeps—when he had cause to think about them at all, which in itself was rare. But the look on Syrra's face was worrying him in earnest now. "You're not telling me she's..."

"It's reversible," Syrra said quickly, and he felt a little of the tension ease. "A more difficult prospect than healing physical wounds, but with time and a good amount of love and support from her pack, the taint will leave her system. What I'm worried about is how advanced the infection seems to be."

"Well, Rochmar's worse off for demonic presence than Kurivon ever was, even at its worst. And she was out there alone in it for a long time," Torren said, burying another twinge of guilt—not for his part in Virien getting lost on the island, but for the way he'd wished it had been Lethie brought safely back to camp instead. Poor Virien had been through hell since she'd gotten lost. Before passing out in the tent, she'd managed to share a brief account of her time away, explaining that she'd been ambushed by a pair of demons who'd tricked her into falling into a deep crevasse. The fall had hurt her badly enough that she was stranded there, waiting for her body to heal enough to climb to freedom.

"Even so." Syrra shook her head. "I know Rochmar a little, from the old days."

That surprised him. "You do?"

She nodded, eyes on the horizon. "The lorekeepers knew it for a lost cause and kept well clear. But our soldiers were obsessed with the place. They were desperate to get over here and explore, no matter how often we warned them it was too dangerous...or maybe because of the warnings, who knew. Anyway, as you can imagine, someone eventually went missing, and we had cause to spend a little time here. Right here, in fact," she added, nodding at the sand. "The beach has always been the safest part of the island."

He was fascinated...and a little embarrassed that in all his preparations for this mission, he'd never thought to ask Syrra about Rochmar, about what the archipelago's ill-fated previous inhabitants had learned about it. "What happened to the missing wolf?"

"Oh, we found him." She gave him a reassuring smile. "He was alive, but weak, and badly hurt, and very embarrassed about what he'd put us through. His was the most advanced case of demonic taint I'd ever seen. He was here for a whole month, you see. Drinking stagnant water, eating tainted game, sleeping in a cave he'd found..."

"A *month*." Torren whistled. "He was lucky to be alive."

"Virien's demonic corruption is more advanced than his by far," Syrra said simply. "To look at her, I'd estimate she'd been here for months, if not years. There's no way she could have passively absorbed this amount of corruption in so little time."

"Then how?" Torren had a horrible feeling he knew what the answer was going to be.

"Actively," Syrra said, her expression grim. "I don't like saying it, Torren, but it's the only explanation I can imagine. She's been in close contact with incredibly powerful demonic entities—likely the archdemons of this island." Torren felt a shudder run down his spine at the word, though Syrra bit her lip. "Not that I'm particularly fond of that style of demonic taxonomy. Archdemons...it suggests a kind of natural hierarchy, and demons are anything but what we would call natural. But it's a useful shorthand for demons of immensely advanced intelligence, power...and cruelty." She sighed. "We have long suspected that a nest of such demons lies at Rochmar's heart. It would explain the intensity of the taint in the soil and air here. I suspect, Torren—and I'm afraid it's a strong suspicion—that Virien has spent the last few days with these monsters."

"What does that mean for her? And for the pack?"

“It means that she’s dangerous,” Syrra said simply. “As I said, I don’t think she’s beyond help, not as long as the rot hasn’t reached her heart—which it wouldn’t have, if she’s the kind of fighter I imagine she is.”

He remembered meeting Virien for the first time, the unconscious power in her bearing, the way her silver eyes had seemed to challenge anyone she glanced at. “She wouldn’t have given in,” he said softly. Syrra smiled, a little tiredly.

“Good. She’ll need that fighting spirit if she’s going to make a full recovery. And in the meantime, you’re going to have to watch her. Try to avoid letting her spend too much time alone with anyone; demonic taint likes to spread, and the host is often unaware they’re being manipulated into doing so. You won’t be able to trust her accounts of what’s happened to her in the last few days...or really anything she says, I’m afraid. Archdemons can manipulate perception and memory—she definitely believes what she told us about getting stuck in the crevasse, but her injuries aren’t at all consistent with her story. It’s also likely that the demons gained partial or full access to her memories. Anything she knows—about the pack, the mission, anything—you should assume that the demons know, too.”

“Yikes,” he said faintly.

“Mm,” the lorekeeper agreed. “There’s another thing, too, Torren, which I sorely wish I didn’t need to bring up, but ...well. Can we speak frankly?”

Night had fallen now, and he could barely see Syrra in the gloom—she was illuminated only by the distant glow of the bonfire on the beach. He was grateful for the darkness, hoping it would cover some of the uneasiness he knew was lingering on his face. “Of course.”

“Virien isn’t the only wolf here who’s demonstrating signs of demonic taint.”

That had come completely out of left field. After a moment of disorientation, he felt fear rise in his chest. Every

Alpha knew that a wolf on his own, especially in a place like this one, was susceptible to demonic taint taking hold...but the close companionship of a pack functioned as a failsafe shield. At least, it was supposed to. "How? Nobody's ever alone," he said, mind racing. "We obey the traditions. Patrols are always in groups of two or more, three communal meals a day, shared quarters—are you saying it's still affecting us?"

"No," Syrra said softly. "No, Torren, you're to be commended on your pack's social cohesion. They're all fine. It's you."

Torren blinked at her, not understanding. "What about me?"

"I thought I was imagining it when I arrived," she said softly. "I hoped you were just tired, or you had an injury from the battle you weren't letting on about...but no, Torren. You're showing signs of demonic corruption. Very early signs—but signs nonetheless."

He felt himself go very still. "That's not possible."

"Have you spent any extended time by yourself, away from the pack?" he heard her ask, apologetic but inescapable. "Overnight, perhaps, while patrolling?"

"I'm not that stupid," he snapped, knowing it wasn't fair to take his fear out on Syrra but unable to control his flare of temper. Even that thought was enough to send cold fear shooting through him. Hadn't he just been thinking about how unusual it was for him to lose control? Was that the demonic taint, already setting in? He buried his face in his hands, doing everything in his power not to scream. A few paces away, his pack was enjoying the first happy, hopeful night they'd had in a long time. He wasn't going to ruin that for them if he could help it.

He felt Syrra's gentle hand on his shoulder, and he forced his gaze up to meet hers, suddenly knowing what he had to do. The safety of his pack was being threatened. That was more important than his selfish desire to save face by

keeping his secrets. He spoke fast, keeping his voice barely above a whisper, and in the most straightforward terms he could, he told her everything that had happened between him and Lethie. To his immense relief, she heard him out without comment or interruption, and when he'd finished speaking, he felt her squeeze his shoulder, just once.

“So—what do we do?” he said, scrubbing wearily at his forehead with the back of his hand. He felt lighter, having shared the secret that had been weighing him down, but at the same time the telling of it had been exhausting. He'd kept to the facts, with little reference to how he'd felt about Lethie, how he'd been beginning to wonder if she might be his soulmate. How could he trust any of his feelings, now that he'd learned he'd been host to demonic corruption for an unknown length of time?

“Good question.” Syrra's soft chuckle sounded very, very tired. “I'll work with you and Virien on reversing the corruption, obviously. But the subject we really need to discuss here—and I know it's a difficult one for you, Torren —”

“Lethie.”

“Yes.”

“You think she's a demon.”

“I think it's a distinct possibility.”

He wanted, very much, to argue with her. But how could he, when what she said made perfect sense? How long could he keep insisting that his gut instinct told him she wasn't what a rising pile of evidence insisted that she was?

“Is there a way we can know for sure?” he heard himself ask, already knowing the answer.

“Yes,” Syrra said simply. “It's one of the first things a lorekeeper learns. But I'd need her in front of me.”

Torren nodded, trying not to think about the way Lethie had reacted when he'd mentioned that a lorekeeper was

coming to the island, or the fact that her disappearance had coincided almost exactly with Syrre's arrival.

“Then we'll find her,” he said simply. “And we'll bring her to you, and we'll know, once and for all.”

“Torren...you should perhaps prepare yourself for the possibility that she won't be found.”

He shook his head in the gathering darkness, a grim new determination burning in his heart. She was out there somewhere, he knew it. She had to be. And he was going to find her if it meant tearing this whole island apart, stone by wretched stone.

Chapter 14 - Lethie

There was no way of keeping track of time down here. The strange light by which the prisoners had been allowed to see remained constant as the hours passed. Lethie was so used to being utterly blind that being able to see the walls was still an unfamiliar novelty that made her skin crawl every time she woke from her uneasy sleep. It was strange how quickly she'd grown accustomed to keeping track of the days and nights, the natural cycles of the world out there. There'd been no use for such things before she'd met Torren.

Not that there was any use now, of course. Even if she could have figured out how much time was passing in the outside world, what good would that information have done her? She was utterly powerless down here. Sure, she gave brief consideration to tearing the bars of her cell apart—she still had access to her wolf's body, at least for now, and she knew her teeth were sharp enough to rend demon flesh. But what then? Even assuming the demons didn't immediately seize control of her mind and body before she could attack the bars, did she really expect to fight her way out through the deepest part of their stronghold, alone?

Because Virien, it was clear to her, was in no state to conspire on an escape attempt. Lethie quickly got into the habit of sitting with her back to the other wolf, keeping that blank, awful face out of her line of sight whenever possible. Cowardice on her part, maybe. An unwillingness to face up to the results of her own actions. She kept thinking about how pleased she'd felt, up on the mountain that day, when she'd outwitted the woman, tricked her into following the most dangerous road back to camp. Her masters must have been listening to their conversation. How long had it taken them to pounce, she wondered? At least the half-healed wounds on Virien's body suggested that she'd put up a fight before they'd overpowered her.

It reminded her, far too much, of her own past. Of the memories she avoided at all costs—of the awful stretch of time between the final, fatal demonic attack on the community she'd sworn to protect...and her capitulation to her captors' offer. Virien had held out longer than Lethie had, she realized. Dull-eyed and catatonic she might have been, but the crucial difference between them was that Virien hadn't willingly surrendered her heart. If she could manage to get out of here, she might be able to heal.

But the same could never be true for Lethie.

She wasn't sure if she was relieved when she woke, some time after her return to the caves, to find the cell opposite was empty. She tried not to wonder what it meant. The thought that Virien had given in as Lethie had was too painful to consider, but she likewise couldn't bear the thought that the demons had grown frustrated and killed her. There were countless other possibilities, of course. The most hopeful was that they'd filled her mind with false information and sent her back to the camp to continue the work that Lethie had started. But even that possibility filled her with misery. Despite her better judgment, she was beginning to think about her future down here, about the days and weeks to come would look like. She'd made the mistake of counting the cells, and realized with a sick jolt that their number matched exactly the number of wolves on the island. Would she sit helpless in her cell and watch as one by one, the brave, clever warriors from the pack she'd infiltrated were dragged in here to have their spirits broken just as hers had been?

Would she live, one day, to see Torren's beautiful eyes made dull and lifeless by their evil?

The only solace was sleep. Heedless of the discomfort of the floor, she curled up against the uneven rocky walls with her tail covering her eyes and chased the fleeting relief of dreams. It was quiet enough down here that even her razor-sharp wolf's hearing couldn't detect much—the island's demonic masters resided much deeper in the cave system, and if their unknown machinations down there made sound, she

couldn't hear it. Her dreams filled her ears instead, hallucinatory sound blurring with reality in the half-dozing dreamy twilight that she'd decided to spend the rest of her life pursuing. She dreamed of the outside world, of wandering Rochmar in the warm, bright sunlight. She dreamed of the pack she'd joined. She dreamed, knowing even in her dreaming that she dreamed of the impossible, of acceptance. Of forgiveness. Of Torren's voice in her ears, low and soft. Of Torren's voice, echoing from the rocky stone walls. Of Torren's voice, shouting her name with an urgency that made her eyelids flutter.

"Are you sure it's not some demon trick? How do you know it's her?" The voice of Torren's second-in-command joined in. Lethie could feel her dream trying to dissolve for some reason, tried without success to dive back into it. She didn't want to lose Torren's voice...but somehow, it sounded again, even louder.

"I just know, alright? It's Lethie. You'll just have to trust me on this one."

"Nah, I don't think so, actually." Baltar's voice, dancing with mirth. Could anything be more out of place in this wretched prison? "Following you on a two-man suicide mission into the demon-infested cave system of the most tainted island in history, that's fine, but I draw the line at your ability to identify the woman we've come to rescue—"

"Shut up, Baltar." She'd shifted automatically, so all-consuming was her need to speak those words allowed. And when she opened her eyes, still bleary with confusion, she flinched in momentary panic at the sight of two figures standing outside her cell.

"Yep," Baltar said after a long, frozen moment. "That's Lethie. All checks out. Now, shall we get her the hell out of there?"

Impossible as the sound of his echoing voice was, Lethie couldn't spare a single thought for Baltar. Her gaze was fixed on Torren's face, every part of her fighting to believe her

eyes. He was covered in dirt and the sticky residue of demon blood, impossibly vivid, impossibly real as he stared back through the bars at her with an unmistakable look of joy on his face. But just as she was beginning to doubt her own eyes, she saw him run a hand through his hair, smoothing it fussily back into its accustomed place over his forehead, and she felt a raw, strange sound tear itself out of her throat. A few seconds later, she realized it was laughter.

“Lethie,” he whispered, his wondrous smile widening. “I can’t believe—I’m so glad you—” He broke off, both of them shooting a sharp glance down the hallway as a distant sound echoed through the caves. “We have to get you out of here.”

A thousand questions were crowded in her mind, choking her into silence. All she could do was nod fervent agreement, half-stumbling forward to wrap her hands around the pulsating, demon-flesh bars. Baltar leaned forward to inspect them, then recoiled at once, his look of curiosity quickly replaced with revulsion.

“Gross,” he said with a prim little shake of his head. “Demons are gross. Unpopular opinion, I know, but I’m just not a fan.” And with a metallic flash and an unpleasantly damp, slithery sound, her rescuers sliced through her prison bars as though they were made of paper. The blades were glinting with more than just reflected light, she realized. That was the faint glow of magic, ringing each blade like a halo. She remembered the same bright flash coming off the water, just before the demons had arrived to kidnap her; the lorekeeper must have stayed to lend further assistance. Well, Lethie wasn’t going to object. The idea of actually getting out of this place remained unreal and elusive, but the dying demon flesh on the floor of her prison cell, that was something she could get behind. If this magical assistance meant more harm would be done to the demons of this island, then Lethie would gladly face her own inevitable destruction at the lorekeeper’s hands.

She reeled a little at the force of her own feeling, reaching out to steady herself—then felt Torren’s warm hand on her arm. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d felt such fury towards her demon masters. She hadn’t thought she was capable of it any longer. Hadn’t they removed her ability to resist? Why, with Torren at her side, did she suddenly feel like she could stamp out the whole damned nest of them without breaking a sweat?

“Can you walk?” Torren asked, his voice full of concern. Lethie felt her face shift, the movement unaccustomed, but still aching familiar—and when an answering smile lit up both of her rescuers’ faces, she knew she was grinning. How long had it been since she’d been capable of that? What else had the demons taken from her... and how much of it was coming back to her now?

“I can do better than walk,” she said, her voice coming more freely from her lips than it had in years. “Did anyone think to bring me a sword?”

“Oh, I get it now,” Baltar said, that lopsided grin threatening to swallow his whole face. “I see why you’re his favorite. And for what it’s worth—you have my blessing.”

“Baltar, is now *really* the time?”

“It’s highly unlikely we’re gonna make it out of here alive, buddy. Gotta speak my truth where I can. Here you go,” Baltar said, tipping her a conspiratorial wink as he pushed his sword into her hands. “Welcome to the pack, Lethie. Hope you’re not a demon!”

They ran, then—a move initiated by Torren for which Lethie was fiercely grateful, given how difficult that conversation could have become. Baltar had drawn another sword from somewhere—strapped to his back, she imagined, though it was anyone’s guess how many hiding places for weapons the resourceful wolf had invented—and it wasn’t long before they found a use for them. The long corridor from the prison widened here into a vast underground cave, a place she’d most likely been but never been able to see before. A

clear, pure light glowed from the wolves' lorekeeper-enchanted weapons, illuminating the path ahead of them...or, more accurately, the rapidly swelling demon army that had appeared to block that path.

This was it, Lethie thought miserably. Her masters would never allow her to raise a weapon against a demon, not without their permission. Her secret was about to be revealed, and it would likely be the last thing either of these brave, reckless fools would know. But as the warriors beside her surged forward to attack, some old instinct overrode her despair for a moment, and she found herself charging with them. Her sword arm moved, and it felt like having a long-lost limb suddenly restored. The borrowed blade sliced through the nearest demon, and then she was striking again, and again, Baltar and Torren beside her. Most of her was still waiting for the other shoe to drop, for the inevitable grip of demonic control to tighten around her heart and to send the sword clattering from her fingertips. Any second now...

But the seconds turned into minutes, the demons falling one by one, their path eventually clear again, and still Lethie's will was her own. Soon they were moving again through rocky hallways, the floor beneath their feet uneven but always sloping gently upwards. Lethie was aware of a rising pressure in the air, the acrid reek of demonic taint intensifying as more and more haphazardly-manifested demons flung themselves into their path. It didn't seem possible...but as they hastened faster and faster through the tunnels, Lethie realized they must be getting closer to the surface. For the first time, she let herself entertain the possibility that they might actually get out of here alive.

And the hope that crackled through her was as unfamiliar as it was terrifying.

"Wait," she gasped, throwing out a hand to stop the two men in their tracks. In the dizzying shock of their arrival, she'd completely forgotten that she wasn't the demons' only captive. "They have Virien—she's alive, but they have her, we have to—"

“She’s safe,” Torren said, grabbing her by the shoulder and forcing her eyes up to meet his. “We found her two days ago, she’s safely back at the camp.”

But that did little to ease the terror that was racing through her. “She was here for days—the overlords would have gotten to her—you can’t leave her alone, she’ll spread corruption—”

“She’s with the lorekeeper,” Torren said, his jaw tight. “We’re across it. We’re safe. Okay? We have to go.”

What was stopping her? Lethie wondered briefly if her feet had been glued to the ground by the influence of her demonic masters, but this reluctance to move felt different somehow, more rooted in her own feelings of shame, so long suppressed but now roaring through her like wildfire. She’d been expecting to die down here, she realized. Now that there was a real chance this insane plan of theirs might actually get her out alive, she would have to acknowledge that sooner or later, Torren and the rest of the pack were going to find out exactly who she was. Would they regret coming down here to save her then, she wondered? Would they wish that they’d left her to die?

“Lethie, *please*.”

Her feet moved at his entreaty, as surely as if her masters had forced her muscles to obey, though she had to admit, following the Alpha’s orders felt a lot better than obeying the demons ever had. They ran faster and faster, darting around twists and turns in the path, all three of them panting hard with exertion. There was no question of shifting—these corridors were too narrow for one wolf, let alone three. And besides, Lethie didn’t want to let go of Torren’s hand, which was warm and solid where it held tightly to hers...

They almost made it. Later, she’d wonder if it was her hesitation that was to blame, whether if she hadn’t lingered for those precious few seconds, all three of them might have escaped unscathed. But whatever the case, their first glimpse

of blue sky at the end of the seemingly-infinite corridor of stone was a short-lived victory. Because no sooner had they seen the light of day than it was blocked out by the terrifying bulk of a demon. Torren hissed his displeasure, sword flashing in the sudden gloom as he held it aloft; behind her, Baltar shouted a warning, his own blade pointed at the second group of demons that were shambling up the stone pathway behind them.

Lethie braced herself. Being surrounded like this made things a little difficult, true, but with their magic-imbued weapons and their combined experience in battles like this one, she was confident they'd be victorious.

But that was when the sky fell.

Whether she lost consciousness in the cave-in or not, Lethie wasn't sure. All she knew was that there was a sudden onslaught of darkness and noise, rocks and dust crashing against her—and through it all, the pressure of Torren's hand, clutching hers in a vice like grip. She felt herself being dragged rapidly forward, hearing Torren shouting above the noise of the cave-in but unable to make out what he was saying. She clung to his hand tightly, eyes squeezed shut against the dust and rocks, her other hand holding onto the hilt of her borrowed sword. Then a sudden brightness flared beyond her closed eyelids, and she felt the blessed relief of cool air on her skin, stumbling to catch herself as Torren pulled her clear of the debris.

There was no time to celebrate their survival. The demons that had hemmed them in were still here, a handful of them dragging themselves out of the rockslide, yet more lurching out of the forest to join the attack. Lethie sprang into action at once, grateful that the rockslide didn't seem to have broken any of her bones, grateful that Torren looked likewise unhurt, save for a few scrapes and bruises. She'd felled three demons before she realized that Baltar was nowhere to be seen. Two more fell before she heard Torren shouting his second-in-command's name. The onslaught was thinning, but Lethie kept her sword up, scanning the treeline. The now-

collapsed cave entrance lay right at the edge of the jungle, where the trees gave way to the central mountain's rocky slope. Her masters must have been desperate, if they'd opted to bring all that rock down. The move had cut off one of the main entrances to the cave system, not to mention crushing any number of foot soldiers.

But they weren't the only casualties. Lethie completed her assessment of the area, concluding that the demon threat had been curtailed, but the dizzy feeling of triumph was short-lived when she turned to make her report to her Alpha. Because Torren was kneeling amid the rubble, the dust on his face cut through with two clean lines of tears. And there, clutched in his arms, was Baltar. Lethie's sword arm dropped to her side and she moved closer. She'd never wished for anything as fiercely as she wished, right then, to hear one of Baltar's terrible wisecracks.

"He's gone," Torren said, though she could tell by the remote, empty quality of his voice that he didn't believe it. Baltar's eyes were closed, his wild mane of hair gray with dust from the cave-in, but he seemed otherwise remarkably intact. Surely a wolf like Baltar wouldn't have been taken down by something so hum-drum as a falling rock. Surely, he was about to sit upright and make fun of both of them for believing he'd been hurt.

But the minutes dragged on, and Baltar's body remained stubbornly still and very, very quiet. She stood like a sentry watching over the grieving Alpha with her borrowed sword still clutched uselessly in her hands. And when the rest of the pack arrived, drawn by the noise of the cave-in and of the battle that had followed, she couldn't bring herself to feel anything but dull resignation as they bound her hands and took her prisoner.

It was the very least of what she deserved.

Chapter 15 - Torren

The last thing Torren had expected to be doing, as the sunset bathed Rochmar in a grim red glow, was organizing a funeral. Given how dangerous their mission here was, he realized, he should have given the matter some thought earlier, but somehow it had never actually seemed like a real possibility that someone might lose their life here. Or more accurately, perhaps, he'd always thought that if anyone was going to die in battle, it would be him. Dead Alphas didn't have to think about funeral arrangements.

But living ones did. And through the numb haze that had enshrouded him since he'd realized that his best friend in all the world wasn't going to wake up, Torren wished he'd made these plans before he was hurting too badly to think straight.

Syrra was, yet again, a blessing. He wasn't sure how long he'd been kneeling in the rubble with Baltar's impossibly still body in his arms—long enough that his joints felt stiff and unresponsive when the lorekeeper gently eased Baltar out of his grip. His pack were gathered at a respectful distance, but they moved forward to help carry the body away from the site of the cave-in. Torren was aware that he was following them, but he may as well have been watching himself from a great, howling distance away. None of this could be real. He was having some kind of extended stress dream, in which the worst imaginable things happened one after the other. First, the death of his best friend. Then, the woman he loved being led away with her hands bound. Had he dreamed that part, too?

“She's safe.” Syrra must have seen him looking around. She was walking at his side, one hand on his elbow, gently steadying him as the pack made their silent way through the jungle in the late afternoon light. “Your wolves report that she was disarmed and escorted safely back to camp.”

“Did you see her? Did you check whether...?” That question had burned with such importance a few short hours ago. He could still remember how his heart had pounded when he’d confided in Baltar that he was going into the caves to look for Lethie, desperate to know once and for all exactly who and what she was. And of course Baltar had insisted on coming with him. How could he have expected anything else?

“I haven’t seen her yet, no,” Syrra said gently. “But Azur and the others will make sure she stays put while we see to the burial.”

“No,” Torren said quickly, his voice threatening to break. “I’m not entombing him in ground as rotten as this.” He kicked hard at the tainted soil beneath his shoes.

“We have a graveyard on Kurivon, overlooking the ocean. There’s space, and he’d be welcome to join the warriors buried there.”

“No burial.” Torren shook his head. “He wouldn’t have wanted that. A warrior’s funeral, that’s what we always agreed on.”

Syrra squeezed his arm in quiet agreement, and he closed his eyes against the almost overwhelming urge to weep. Tears would have to wait until later. If he started crying now, he wouldn’t stop...and he still owed his friend this final debt. He owed him far more, of course, but those debts would have to remain unpaid until they were reunited, in whatever world lay beyond this one.

And so, once night had well and truly fallen and the sky above was blanketed with stars, Torren and his pack put their valiant second-in-command to rest in a manner of which he certainly would have approved, had he been present to volunteer his opinion. Torren had always felt that his pack was the best in the world, but that night they rose to new heights. Seemingly without any communication at all, they divided the work that needed to be done between themselves and got to work preparing the body, gathering the materials needed for the funeral, and readying the site for the ceremony. To a wolf,

they were kind to him, and his gratitude was almost enough to undermine his determination to hold off on weeping until the funeral was done. Later, he knew, he would face their questions about why he and Baltar had snuck off together on such a dangerous mission without telling anyone what they were up to. But right now, he couldn't think about the prospect of holding a formal audience with his pack for the first time without Baltar by his side.

So he kept his focus on the funeral. Given that it was almost entirely impromptu, it was a beautiful affair. Syrra oversaw the proceedings, exuding just enough authority to steer events without ever overstepping her place or crowding those who grieved. Most of the pack stepped up to say a few words over Baltar's body, which lay peacefully on an improvised stretcher, cushioned by a bed of dry leaves, fallen fronds and tree boughs from the jungle. When Torren went up, he noticed that all of Baltar's pockets were bulging strangely—and tears sprang to his eyes when he found that each one contained a blade or weapon of some description, many of which belonged to pack members. Baltar had never gone anywhere without an overabundance of weapons hidden about his person...the pack had thought of everything.

Once everyone had said their piece—some loud enough for the group to hear, some in a low whisper intended only for their fallen comrade—the pack gathered as one wolf to carry Baltar's bier down to the water's edge. By the time they'd pushed it out into the water, small flames were spreading along its edges, and it wasn't long before the whole stretcher was engulfed in flames that danced higher and higher into the dark night sky. The waves carried the stretcher further and further from the shore, and Torren felt a tear roll down his cheek, glad to know his best friend would be at rest far beyond where the demons of Rochmar could reach him.

He stood at the edge of the water with the waves lapping at his feet for a long time after the light of the funeral pyre had subsided. One by one, his pack drifted back up the beach toward the tents, and eventually he was alone except for

Syrra, who had moved some distance along the beach out of respect for his solitary reflections. Eventually, he pulled his gaze away from the place where he'd imagined the funeral pyre had been when the flames burned out, though he knew in truth that the remains would be some distance from the island by now, pulled by the deceptively swift currents that lay below the waves. The last thing he wanted to do right now was talk about the demon situation...but on reflection, the idea of being left alone with his thoughts right now was equally unbearable.

Syrra was looking out over the water when he approached her, her white robes gently illuminated by the faint starlight.

“So,” he said softly. “Exactly how close are we to a mutiny right now?”

A soft chuckle. “Well, let me see,” she said idly, not moving her gaze from the water. “This afternoon, this pack’s second-in-command was killed during an incredibly dangerous rescue mission, conducted without the approval or even the knowledge of the pack. The mission was solely focused on the retrieval of a woman who stood accused of significant demonic corruption—a woman who had previously fled captivity before those accusations could be verified or dismissed. Are those the facts, more or less?”

He closed his eyes for a moment. His instincts were telling him to bluff and downplay the situation, but grief had hollowed him out too much to bother. “Sounds pretty bad, laid out like that.”

“Sure does. You can’t put this off any longer, Torren. You’re going to have to introduce me to this woman.”

“I know.”

“That frightens you.”

Why dissemble now? What was the point of putting up a brave face in front of Syrra? “Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m afraid that they’re telling the truth.”
There—he’d finally said it out loud. And just as he’d expected, it felt like the worst betrayal of his life. “Because if she really is a demon...then all of this is my fault. Everything that happened to Virien, every attack—Baltar—” For a moment, he couldn’t speak at all, and it took every remaining fragment of his willpower to settle his pulse and unstick his voice from his throat. “If I was wrong about her...if my judgment was so flawed that I not only welcomed a demon into my pack, but defended her when my wolves saw the truth about her...then I’m not fit to lead this pack, and I never have been.”

Syrra was looking at him closely. “It’s more than that, though, isn’t it?”

He almost laughed. “More than my entire life unraveling?”

“This woman—what does she mean to you?”

He hesitated for a moment, though he wasn’t sure why. He’d already spilled the rest of his humiliation to Syrra, what were a few more details on the pile? Was it really that much more embarrassing that he’d acted the way he had based partially on the suspicion that Lethie was his soulmate? But before he could open his mouth, a high-pitched scream made them both snap around, immediately on high alert. Torren would almost have welcomed a demon attack at this point. Maybe he could die heroically in battle and avoid having to deal with any more of the miserable situation he was in. They might not remember him as a good leader, but at least they’d remember him as having gone down fighting.

But there were no demons in sight. What he saw instead filled him with more dread than any demon ever had. Up by the tents, his pack was gathered in a loose semicircle around the firepit, as they usually did when meals were served. But there was nothing cooking on the remains of the day’s fire, which had long since burned down to embers. They were looking instead at the prisoner, who was on her knees with her

arms being restrained on either side by Roda and Ditha. The dark-haired woman was holding one of her daggers aloft, the remnants of the firelight glowing from its sleek surface. Torren's heart felt like it stopped beating, time slowing to a near standstill as he grappled with what he was seeing. Lethie, her chin lifted, defiant to the very end as she struggled against her bonds...was Ditha about to cut her throat? She was a tough and merciless woman, he'd quickly come to learn, but to kill an unarmed prisoner in cold blood seemed beyond her.

"Oh, *that's* why," he heard Syrra murmur, sounding at once frustrated and sad. Ditha was bringing the blade down, but slowly, too slowly for it to be a killing strike. Torren's fear didn't diminish, exactly, but it did make room to add confusion to the mix.

"Why what?"

"Ditha asked me to bless her weapons again, before the funeral." Syrra sounded unhappy. "I thought it had something to do with honoring Baltar's passing. I was wrong."

"Stay back," Torren said, glancing sidelong at Syrra. "This is pack business."

To his relief, she nodded. "Understood."

Torren knew he had to act before the scene got out of hand—and it had to be his authority, not the lorekeeper's, that restored order. Whatever Lethie's true nature, the fact remained that Ditha was overstepping her position in the pack by retrieving the prisoner without his approval. If he didn't get on top of this small act of defiance, the whole pack would quickly run out of control. He hastened up the beach, walking as quickly as he could without running, calling Ditha's name sharply over the cool wind that had picked up as the evening had worn on. He was only halfway to the firepit when he realized that his pack was looking at him with a cool curiosity quite at odds with their usual attitude of warmth and respect. He couldn't bring himself to look Lethie in the eye, frightened that what he would see there would undermine his resolve.

And right now, he needed all the resolve he had if he was going to maintain control of this pack.

“What are you doing?” he asked, keeping his tone conversational, though the way Ditha’s shoulders tensed told him she could hear the anger in his voice. There was no fear in her eyes when she looked at him, however...and she didn’t lower the knife in her hand.

“What should have been done long ago,” she said, her tone hard and dismissive.

“Do you expect me to stand by while you execute an unarmed prisoner?” he demanded, taking an experimental step forward. The pack didn’t step forward to obstruct him, but from the subtle shifting of body weight, he could tell that a few of them had considered it. His heart was sinking into his feet. Had he already lost them?

“Execute isn’t the word I would choose,” Ditha replied coldly. “Destroy, perhaps. Or simply kill.”

“Without a trial?”

“Trials are for wolves,” Ditha snarled. “Trials are for creatures with the ability to feel and to reason.”

“You have no proof that Lethie lacks that ability,” Torren countered. “Without a trial—”

“Oh, save it, Alpha,” Roda blurted out. Ever reliable, that girl—it seemed he could always count on her to lose her cool. But to his dismay, Ditha only smiled at the interjection. Roda continued, impassioned: “If you had any intention of putting her on trial, you’d have done it by now. We can all see it, you know. She got in your head. You’re tainted.”

“That’s an incredibly serious accusation,” he said, forcing his voice to remain level.

“We’ve heard that before, haven’t we?” Ditha asked, glancing around at his pack. At least they had the good grace to stay silent...though Torren couldn’t help but feel betrayed that not one of them spoke up in his defense. “But you didn’t

take our last accusation very seriously at all, Alpha. Which is why we've taken matters into our own hands."

"I'm warning you," Torren said through gritted teeth.

"Torren." He was startled to hear Lethie's voice, and horrified by how exhausted she sounded, how resigned to her fate. "Leave it."

"Ditha, if you harm that prisoner, it will be in violation of a direct command from your Alpha."

"Any Alpha who'd forbid me from harming a demon is no Alpha I care to serve," Ditha said, eyes burning. And with that, she lowered her blade to Lethie's throat.

From this close, Lethie's scream of pain was loud enough to make him flinch. His wolf was howling, his whole nervous system lighting up with adrenaline—he looked wildly at Lethie, expecting to see a torrent of crimson blood spilling down her front from her throat, and in that moment he knew he'd kill Ditha with his own hands or die in the attempt. But then he realized there was no blood, no cut. Ditha had simply pressed the flat of her blade against Lethie's throat for a second before pulling it away without even breaking the skin.

But what it did do was much, much worse. Roda had taken a fistful of Lethie's hair and was holding her upright with some difficulty—because she was thrashing and howling with pain, struggling wildly with her bound hands to reach her throat. The skin where the knife had touched it was black in the firelight, and as Torren watched it seemed to bubble and pulsate. Smoke was rising from the mark, and his pack recoiled as one wolf when the wind brought the scent in their direction. He knew it the moment it struck his nose, though he wished with all his heart that he didn't.

But Torren had been a demon hunter his whole life, and he'd recognize the scent of demon flesh anywhere.

He drew his sword, and if he'd thought his pack had been still as statues before, it was nothing compared to the frozen atmosphere of expectation that fell over them now.

Ditha was watching him, her face unreadable, but he held her eyes as he began to slowly approach the firepit. It wasn't exactly respect that he could see on her face as she stepped back, but it was close enough. Roda hesitated a moment longer, but she stepped back too. He was still the Alpha, at least right now. There was a chance he could turn this around, so long as he didn't waste another second. If he was to maintain control of the pack, he needed to do what he should have done the moment he'd realized that there was something that didn't quite add up about the seventh contestant.

Lethie lifted her head, and those dull silver eyes were utterly without surprise as she regarded him, his sword held high. One blow would be enough. One clean blow would separate her head from her shoulders and put an end to all of this. Restore his reputation in the eyes of his pack. Prove to the newcomers that he was an Alpha still worth following. Avenge the death of his best friend.

Torren took a deep breath, knowing exactly what he had to do. And once he'd gathered his nerve, he struck.

For all her bravado, he heard Roda gasp when his blade came whistling down. He was already making the second strike before the first could register with the onlookers. Two thick coils of rope hit the ground, and as if in answer to the silent prayer he'd whispered before he'd swung the sword, Lethie didn't hesitate before she shot to her feet and sprinted into the trees. Chaos erupted then, swallowing him whole, but Torren felt an eerie calm at the center of it all. His sword was wrenched from his hand and at a shout from Ditha he felt himself seized by wolves who had, until very recently, been his loyal followers. He'd made his choice. Whatever he was, he wasn't their Alpha any longer. And whatever fate they chose for him, Torren knew, he would accept without complaint.

Because even execution would be better than being responsible—for the second time that day—for the death of someone he loved.

Chapter 16 - Lethie

As she ran through the trees, throwing every last bit of strength she possessed into getting as far from that camp as physically possible, Lethie felt the strange realization dawning on her that she was about to get everything she'd ever dreamed of. It would have made her laugh if she could have spared the breath.

The couple of hours she'd spent as a prisoner of the wolf pack had been no more helpful than the hours (days?) she'd spent as a prisoner to the demons. She still had no idea what was going on with anybody involved—with her demon masters, with her fellow contestants in the Soulmate Games, with Torren or his wolf pack, and least of all herself. The one piece of knowledge she'd thought she could rely on was that the demons of this island had absolute control of her body, mind and spirit, and that any free will she thought she might be exercising was an illusion. But even that conviction had begun to crumble since the reckless, stupid, unbelievably heroic thing that Torren and Baltar had done for her. Ever since they'd pulled her out of her cell, she'd been bracing herself for the iron hand of her masters to tighten around her heart again, to strike her dead—or worse, turn her into a puppet to serve their whims directly. But they hadn't done it. And no matter how she looked at it, she couldn't see why they'd have done something so desperate as caving in an entire tunnel to prevent her from escaping if they'd had any alternative.

Which could only mean that their control of her was less absolute than she'd thought. She wasn't naive enough to imagine she was free; she could still feel the rot at the center of her, pounding through her veins with every beat of her heart. But for whatever reason, their control was slipping. And that meant that a range of new possibilities had opened up for her future, uniquely terrifying in the way that only hope could be. Maybe she could make it off Rochmar, find her way to one

of the tiny islands that surrounded it and live out her days in peace. Maybe she could go even further—steal a boat, set out for the nearest coastline. If the short time she'd spent away from her demon overlords had been enough to weaken their control of her this much, maybe she could get far enough away to destroy the rot completely...

Her vision was blurring and her breath was ragged in her chest when she skidded to a halt at the far edge of the island, atop a low cliff that overlooked the tiny offshore island that she'd always thought about in those brief, guilty moments when she allowed herself to imagine freedom. It was closer than it had ever been right now, she knew that. Looking at it should have made her feel...well, it should have made her feel *something*, at least. How long had she hardly dared to dream of a life on that stupid rock out there? Now she was actively trying to picture it...but all that would come to her stupid, broken brain was Torren's face. And the only thing she could feel, more painful than anything the demons had ever done to her, was a crushing sense of guilt.

Lethie had given up on guilt a long time ago. She'd given up on a lot of things around the same time, in fact... things like joy, and pleasure, and hope. Camaraderie. Friendship. The kind of trust and honesty that packmates could share. And love, that was a big one. Love had been the easiest one of all to give away, because she'd never really believed in it, even before her old life had ended. Maybe that was why she'd given herself away to the demons, when everyone else had bravely faced death instead.

But here they were, all the ghosts of the things she'd thought she'd given up for good. She'd fought alongside that brave pack of warriors, and they'd welcomed her as one of their own, even though she was actively fomenting dissent among them. And as much as she'd tried to pretend otherwise, she'd enjoyed their company. Enjoyed being part of a pack again, enjoyed hearing their banter and their laughter, even enjoyed Baltar's terrible jokes...and then there had been Torren. It was a testament to how deep her denial had been

that it had taken her so long to realize what was happening between them. She'd tried to fight it, tried to believe that he was her enemy, that he deserved the awful fate her demon masters had in store for him.

But she'd failed, hadn't she? Because right now, she was sitting on the edge of a low cliff, seconds away from getting everything she'd wanted at the start of all of this. All she needed to do was leap down into the water, swim out to the island, and put all of this behind her. There was certainly nothing good here on Rochmar. The pack was no doubt already searching for her...she lifted a hand to the fading welt at her throat, where Ditha's enchanted blade had finally revealed the truth of what she was. They'd kill her the moment they saw her. As for Torren...her heart clenched again, and she felt tears spring to her eyes. Of all the awful things she'd done, what she'd done to Torren was the worst of all. Not only had she sabotaged his pack's mission, destroyed his authority as Alpha and caused the death of his best friend—worse still than all of that, she'd poisoned him, too. He'd opened his heart to her, trusted her despite all the warning signs, and in repayment for all his kindness, she'd turned him into something as awful as her.

She'd seen it on his face in the moment before he'd cut her ropes and freed her. A good soldier—a good Alpha—a good wolf would have cut her head from her shoulders. But Torren, instead, had spared her worthless life, most likely at the cost of his own. Tears were rolling down her cheeks now as she shivered on the clifftop, staring with unseeing eyes at the tiny island down below. He'd traded his life for hers. What an awful deal. Even at her absolute best, he was worth ten of her. A hundred.

She knew that now. In a way, she'd known it since she'd first laid eyes on him. The arrogant, dashing, recklessly brave, impossibly handsome Alpha who'd sailed to Rochmar for glory, only for Lethie to ruin his whole life...this whole time, she'd let the grief of knowing there could be no true

future for them cloud her vision. But she could see it all clearly now, and she knew what she had to do.

It was too late for her, she'd always known that. But it wasn't too late for Torren. If anyone was strong enough to turn back the rot and purge this wretched island of its demons, it was him. And if there was anything at all that she could do to redeem him in the eyes of his pack, she would give anything she had to do it—including her worthless life. What was a life of solitude on an empty rock? Day after day for grief at his absence and guilt at what she'd done. Death would be preferable, she realized. A death that might mean something was a better choice than a life that certainly wouldn't. And for the first time, Lethie understood why her fallen comrades had chosen to die fighting.

Her whole body was burning with a steely new determination. She was years late to the party, but at least she was on her way.

She resisted the urge to go sprinting back to the campsite then and there. As much as she yearned to see Torren's face again, she knew something as sentimental as an apology was too selfish to be her sole motivation here. It wasn't enough to apologize; she needed to clear his name, to show the pack he'd betrayed for her that he was a good man who'd been temporarily led astray. But that would be a difficult prospect. Nobody would believe the word of a known demon—if anything, Lethie speaking in Torren's defense would only incriminate him further...

Perhaps that was the key, she realized slowly. Perhaps her demonic nature was the very tool she could use to show the pack that their leader was still on their side. If she could engineer a situation in which he chose his pack over his feelings for her...but he'd been given that opportunity back at the firepit, hadn't he? He'd chosen to free her. Because he loved her. Because he was a good man. Why did good people have to be so damned *difficult*?

She'd just have to keep thinking, that was all. But that was the moment that an eerie howl split through the peaceful night. Her whole body shivered with recognition at the sound, a generations-old instinct inviting her to lift her head to join the song. First one voice, then another, then a third...the sound grew and grew, until she could hear five voices echoing through the night, somehow terrifying in its beauty. And as she listened to the song, Lethie felt several horrible realizations come to light.

Those were the five voices of the wolves who had once been her fellow contestants—minus Virien, of course, who most likely wouldn't be strong enough to leave her bed for another few days. And that was no ordinary howl. The intricate song dancing through the trees and lifting the hairs on the back of Lethie's neck was a ritual hunting cry. What they were hunting, Lethie couldn't tell...but it wasn't exactly hard to narrow it down. Those warrior women might have come to this island hoping to win Torren's heart...but their real purpose here was to hunt demons.

And what more appropriate target, on a day marked by the death of a packmate and the loss of an Alpha, than the demon responsible for all their sorrow?

The howl broke off, and Lethie felt adrenaline surge through her body. She forced herself to breathe, and to remember that she could move a lot faster through this jungle than the wolves could. She had a little time at least before they reached her...and that wasn't the only advantage she had over them. She felt her paws in the soil, feeling the same uneasy thrill she always felt when she remembered the interconnectedness of this island's demonic presence. The rot in her heart gave her a powerful influence over the taint in the soil. The last time she'd used it, of course, had been disastrous—she winced at the memory of that ambush, the revulsion in the voices of the other contestants as they'd witnessed her manifesting a demon.

But maybe that kind of revulsion was exactly what she needed right now. Maybe the key to restoring Torren to his

pack's good graces was to show him what she truly was. Hadn't her demonic masters taught her that? To corrupt Torren, they'd given her back her body, helped her to hide her true nature and masquerade as a wolf. It was time to stop lying. Torren had taken pity on her because he'd believed that she was a wolf like him, a wolf who could be redeemed, could be saved. Every minute she'd spent with him, she'd been terrified of her mask slipping, of Torren gaining even a glimpse of what she truly was...because she knew that it would change how he felt about her.

Well, how he felt about her was the whole problem. And the solution had been inside her the whole time.

Lethie would have laughed if she hadn't been worried the sound would alert the hunters to her position. Well, they'd be alerted soon enough, if she had anything to say about it. She let her paws sink into the corrupted soil of Rochmar, an island she'd once dreamed of purging of demons altogether. She closed her eyes and focused on her heartbeat, and the sensation she had always done her best to drown out...the feeling of the thick, gristly band of demonic rot that encircled her heart and tied her unwilling spirit to the malevolent infection that held this island in its grip.

But that connection went two ways. And the more Lethie focused on the beat of her heart, the more she could feel it echoed in every corner of the island...every drop of corrupted water in every leaf, every grain of poisoned sand, every demonic limb that had ever left a misshapen footprint on Rochmar's surface. She was a part of that force, utterly at its mercy, utterly possessed by it...but that meant that the reverse was also true. Lethie hesitated for just a moment, aware she was about to step across a border from which she'd been holding herself back for years, aware that there would likely be no return.

Then she thought of the look on Torren's face when he'd chosen to betray his pack to spare her life. In that moment, all of her hesitation disappeared.

Lethie took a deep breath...then opened herself at last to the full power that lay in her demonic heart.

Chapter 17 - Torren

Had this been how Baltar had imagined the Soulmate Games ending, Torren wondered? When the thrice-damned scheme had occurred to his unrepentant asshole of a best friend, had Baltar considered even the outside possibility of mutiny breaking out? If he had, he deserved a medal. And when Torren joined him in the afterlife—which at this rate would be in a matter of hours, if not even less—he'd make sure a good punch in the jaw went along with it. Strange, how being mad at Baltar was one of the only things that seemed to ease the pain of his absence. It was probably for the best. He wasn't sure if Baltar would have been more likely to laugh or cry at his predicament. Either way, much like the rest of Torren's pack, he couldn't imagine that Baltar would have been any help.

Not that he could blame them. Looking at the situation from their perspective, he wouldn't have trusted himself either. He'd always insisted that he held his authority purely on the grounds of being the best man for the job—the strongest warrior in the pack, the most experienced hunter of demons, and the most dedicated to the cause of wiping them out. After what he'd done for Lethie, he could no longer claim to be any of those things. So he couldn't begrudge his pack their absolute lack of loyalty as they stood back, watching with troubled but resigned expressions as the pack's newest members took him prisoner.

Strange, how calm he felt as they bound his hands behind him and led him down to the platform by the water. The moon was glinting between the patchy clouds above, but it was still eerie and dark where the waves were washing ashore, and he shivered a little in the cool breeze that came in over the ocean. Ditha climbed atop the raised dais and the pack seemed to fall quiet instinctively, their rapt attention falling to her without her having to ask for it. She was good at this, Torren noted from where he knelt in the sand before her,

aware that two of the other contestants had weapons pointed at his back. There was a natural charisma in her quiet, determined bearing. Had the trials gone differently, she might have won a place by his side...he could imagine her ruling the pack alongside him. Perhaps she'd take over as sole Alpha, once she'd dealt with him.

He couldn't even bring himself to feel apprehensive about what form that might take. Punishment, exile, execution...what was any of it, compared to losing Lethie? He'd known, even as his sword had cut through her ropes, that this would be the last time he ever saw her. But despite that, he couldn't bring himself to regret what he'd done. Was that the demonic corruption talking? He wished he could ask Syrra. But the lorekeeper had been at Ditha's elbow ever since they'd taken Torren prisoner, deep in conversation he couldn't make out no matter how hard he strained his hearing. Probably for the best. It would have hurt to hear Syrra advising his replacement on how best to deal with a demon.

"Torren, previous Alpha of this pack." He straightened automatically at the sound of his name. Ditha's silver eyes were burning right through him. At least she'd sheathed her daggers...though her hands were never far from their hilts. "There's no need for an accounting of your crimes—every wolf here witnessed them personally."

A murmur of assent from the group, a grave sigh from Syrra. He lowered his gaze. No point arguing with that. No point arguing with any of it, really.

"Since realizing that all was not right with the known demon Lethie, my comrades and I have been working hard on a suggested course of action. Our goals are simple. We want justice for what our sister in arms has been through, and we want what any wolf of our warrior's creed would want—the demon removed from our midst. But I will not proceed with any action if the wolves of this pack disapprove. You have all been kind to us," she said simply, her eyes moving around the gathered group of wolves. "You have welcomed us to your ranks, despite the bizarre reason for our presence here. We

have dined together, dwelt together, fought demons together. We will proceed here only with your full consent.”

Torren had a horrible feeling that she’d get it. Torren had betrayed the pack when he’d set their enemy free. How could he expect them to defend him now?

“I am not a member of this pack,” Syrra said, her soft voice just loud enough to make itself heard by this group. “It has always been true that I have no authority nor desire to interfere with your activities. But I do advise against this course of action.”

“Heard, Senior Lorekeeper.” Ditha inclined her head respectfully. “We may well reflect on your words in the days to come, and see their wisdom. Nevertheless, I put our suggestion to the pack now. Torren brought us all here to compete in the Soulmate Games.” Her tone dripped with scorn. For a moment, he considered pointing out that the Games had been Baltar’s idea—but that didn’t really make a difference, did it? Torren had been the one who’d allowed it, played along, even enjoyed the rivalries and tension between these women for the way it stroked his own ego. He was as responsible as anyone for what had happened. “And so I suggest that Torren be the one who brings the Games to a close.”

From the look on Syrra’s face, he could tell that she knew exactly what Ditha was talking about. He wished he shared that knowledge. A chill ran down his spine at the realization that the low, worried conversation he’d tried unsuccessfully to eavesdrop on had likely been Syrra attempting to talk Ditha out of whatever grim fate she was about to announce. That didn’t bode well.

“The most recent trial ended without a clear winner,” Ditha was continuing now, and he could see a savage light gleaming in her eyes. She and the others all had the look of women who were keenly anticipating the sweet taste of revenge. “I propose that we amend this oversight by staging

the trial again. We contestants will have until dawn to hunt down a demon—but this time, no need to capture it alive.”

“Any demon at all, Ditha?” Roda asked, her eyes bright with mischief and her tone making it very clear that she knew the answer to this question.

“No, Roda. We’ll be hunting this pack’s former Alpha.” Her grin widened. “We all came here to win your heart, didn’t we, Torren? You can hardly blame us for taking that challenge literally.” Before he could respond, her eyes had returned to the pack—Torren had to stop thinking of them as his pack, he realized numbly. If they were his pack, they’d have intervened by now. “I invite any dissenters to speak now.”

The silence that followed that statement ranked among the worst experiences of his life. He was grateful when Ditha nodded once, simply, and brought the unanimous vote to a close.

“You have my thanks. I’ll offer another suggestion now, if I may, regarding the future of the pack’s leadership. With Baltar dead, there is no clear successor for the position of Alpha. I understand that there are no established rules or traditions for the selection of a successor.” He saw his wolves nodding, and felt oddly embarrassed at the oversight. The rules for the selection of a successor had been simple, from his perspective—he would be Alpha of the pack until he died gloriously in battle, and then it would be someone else’s problem. He hadn’t imagined he would be kneeling in the sand, waiting patiently for the mutineers to finish usurping him before they hunted him for sport.

“I suggest that the responsibility of Alpha be conferred upon the wolf who puts an end to this demon,” Ditha said simply, flicking her hand disdainfully in his direction. “The winner of the Soulmate Games was to have led the pack alongside Torren; we thought there was a certain symmetry in giving the winner that full responsibility. Only by the willing

consent of the pack, of course. And needless to say, participation in the hunt will be open to all.”

Torren found himself looking at Syrra, who was watching over these proceedings with a deliberately neutral expression. He wished she'd use some of that awesome power of hers to intervene here...but he knew it was his own stupid arguments that had tied her hands. He'd stood before the Council of Alphas and insisted that whatever dangerous, reckless games he and his pack got up to on Rochmar, it was pack business. She was an outsider, and along with the rest of the Council, she had been told by Torren himself not to intervene in the Games.

“We will not proceed without a unanimous vote,” Ditha said now with a note of finality. “As someone who aspires to earn the title of Alpha, I would consider that victory forfeit if a single pack member disapproved. So again, I invite any voice of dissent to speak freely.”

Torren couldn't take another one of those awful silences. If he was going to die at the hands of his pack, he was damn well going to go out with a wisecrack. He cleared his throat, then heard the sound of a dozen hands moving surreptitiously towards the hilt of their weapon. “I suppose mine doesn't count, right?”

The silence of a joke falling flat was almost as bad as the silence of his pack quietly co-signing his death warrant. Ditha didn't dignify him with a response. She did nod once, tightly, once she'd deemed that the silence had lasted long enough...and with that, Torren's fate was sealed. He was dragged onto his feet again, pins and needles rushing into his hands when his bindings were loosened. It was Roda who pushed his own sword roughly into his hands, no sign of the friendly, charming girl he'd met in those hard silver eyes. Arming him was a nice touch, at least—not that one sword would do much against a dozen of the fiercest warriors alive. Torren was good, but he wasn't that good.

“You have ten minutes to get as far as you can, demon,” Ditha proclaimed, her voice as pitiless and distant as the stars.

Torren couldn't resist. He didn't want his pack's last memory of him to be an ignominious retreat for the trees. So he drew himself up to his full height, and performed one of Baltar's most elaborate sarcastic salutes. “Good hunting,” he said brightly, then bolted for the treeline before there was any time to hear the joke fall flat again.

The forest was oddly quiet. It had to be past midnight by now, at the very least, given that it felt like it had been about a thousand years since sunset, and demons were usually at their most active and troublesome between midnight and dawn. It was a testament to how preoccupied he was with the vengeful wolves who were going to pursue him that he was well into the jungle before he noticed the surprising absence of demonic ambush. He'd at least have expected something unpleasant to drop out of the canopy of branches above him by now. He inhaled deeply, closing his eyes and relying on his wolf's heightened senses to assess ...the air was still sharp and acrid as ever with demonic taint. So where were they all?

He shook off the concern and kept running. Right now, he had much bigger problems than demons, and the more ground he could cover with the head start they'd given him, the better. He was doing everything he could to keep his panic under control. At least half a dozen of the most experienced and formidable demon hunters in the world—more, depending on how many members of his pack had decided to take up the challenge—were hot on his heels, all sharing the single goal of tearing his heart from his chest. What a beautiful way to bring a pack together, he thought sourly. Strange, how difficult it was to feel angry with them. He'd have done the same in their place. And it wasn't like the challenge Ditha had set was especially ghoulish. There was nothing especially macabre about ripping out a demon's heart.

The only problem was that Torren was fairly certain he was no demon. But then again, he'd been wrong quite a lot

over the last few weeks.

He began to lose his battle with his fear when the howling started. He hadn't expected such a haunting announcement of his imminent death, and when he heard how many voices were picking it up, he picked up the pace despite his concerns about wearing himself out too soon. The one thing he couldn't afford was despair. Despair would have him give up, lay down in the dirt and wait for the winner to put a stop to things. He had to focus on the one, fragile glimmer of hope in all of this. Ditha was an uncompromising, ferocious woman and a definite frontrunner for the wolf who was going to rip his heart out. But Torren's tenure as Alpha had helped him hone a skill for picking up on people's strengths, and he'd seen enough of her to know that integrity and commitment to her word were paramount. She had said that the hunt would last until dawn. That meant that if he could survive that long, he might just get a stay of execution. Long enough to get off the island, maybe. Throw himself at the mercy of the Council of Alphas? The idea was utterly galling, but it was better than being ritually executed, at least.

He'd hoped the howling would stop once the hunt was on, but to his dismay, his pursuers seemed determined to keep playing mind games with him. Time after time, he settled down to rest for a few blessed moments, only to hear a howl pierce the night much closer to him than he'd thought, and he'd be off again, running with all his might. He quickly gave up wondering why the island's demon population seemed to be so inert; he needed all his focus to keep moving, keep a few steps ahead of those terrifying howls. Why did they keep howling like that? Surely it was disadvantageous to let their competitors know where they were. It wasn't his whole pack who kept howling, he realized. The same five voices kept sounding, a few of them always unsettlingly close, but a few of them much more distant, seemingly on the other side of the island.

That was when he realized with a sick jolt that the wolves who were howling weren't worried about alerting their

competitors to their location. In fact, that was the whole point. They were working together. Slowly but surely, they were drawing a net around him that would tighten and tighten until there was no direction he could turn to escape. Heart thudding with panic, he broke into a sprint again, ignoring the burn of lactic acid in his muscles, the desperate thudding of his heart that told him again and again that he was really pushing it. When had he last eaten? When had he last slept? None of it mattered. All that mattered was that he kept running.

The howls sounded again, and he stopped dead in his tracks, paws skidding on the dead leaves. One of them had to be straight ahead of him, barely a few hundred yards away by his guess; he turned and ran back the way he'd come, cursing himself for his error in judgment. But another chorus of howls made his pawsteps falter and he turned sharply at the realization he was running straight towards another wolf. Torren wavered. There was no sense heading down towards Rochmar's coastline—he'd be far too easy to trap against the cliff's edge, and he knew better to imagine that he'd survive the jump down onto the jagged rocks that encircled most of the island. The only way was up, towards where the jungle gave way to the foreboding rocky mountainside, toward the mountain's peak. Desperation made him hopeful. Maybe he'd find a cave or a tunnel that led into the island's demon-infested heart.

The idea made him feel sick. He'd certainly die in those tunnels, he knew that much—it was a miracle he and Baltar had managed to get in and out the way they had, and that had been with the element of surprise and Syrra's enchanted weapons on their side. But what he really hated was the idea of the pack assuming that he'd run home to his demon buddies. Corrupted or not, he was a wolf and he'd die like a wolf, with the stars bright above him and the roar of battle in his ears.

Running uphill added an extra layer of difficulty to what was already the worst night of his life. He was genuinely concerned he might pass out when he realized the trees were

starting to thin out, the soil beneath his paws growing rockier as the ground grew ever steeper. There hadn't been a howl in quite some time, he realized, and what was worse, his breathing was too hard and his heartbeat too rapid in his ears to give him much insight into the quieter sounds around him. There could have been ten wolves up ahead of him and he wouldn't have heard them over the sounds of his own protesting body. His vision, never his strongest sense, was blurring too, and the faint sharp scent he could detect with every sharp inhale wasn't demonic taint, as he'd thought, but the unmistakable metallic tang of his own blood.

It was with a sense of resignation that bordered on relief, then, that he heard a low howl, nothing like the unearthly high-pitched chorus that had been closing in on him for the last few hours. The howl was joined by another, and another, and another. There was no way these wolves didn't know exactly where he was, their voices placed them barely a few dozen paces away. He could keep running, he supposed, swaying on his feet as he lowered his head and tried desperately to catch his breath. Maybe if he looked wretched enough as they closed in on him, he might be able to feint and get away from them...but then what? He could hear their footsteps now, clear and deliberate as they moved in closer. He'd been well and truly outplayed here.

His last hope died when he looked up at the sky, trying to force dawn into existence by sheer force of will. But the stars were still twinkling there, and there were wispy clouds scudding across the moon, and as beautiful as the sight of that night sky was, his appreciation was dampened by the knowledge that it would be the last one he ever saw. He hadn't even been able to last until dawn. The maudlin thought occurred to him that perhaps going down fighting was for the best. Torren had never been afraid of death. With the way he'd lived, it simply hadn't been an option to be afraid. He'd just always thought it would be a demon that finally took him down. A huge one, of course—unprecedented in its power, more dangerous than any that had come before—

And that was the moment that the trees behind him splintered and broke, and a creature drawn straight from any wolf's worst nightmare plunged into the clearing with a shriek that shook leaves from the trees and seemed to make the rocky soil of Rochmar itself shake.

Torren turned to face the beast in what felt like slow motion. For a moment, his mind refused to classify it as a demon by reason of its size alone. It loomed above the tops of the trees, and more destruction followed with every shift of its great body. Was this why he'd been so curiously undisturbed as he'd run through the trees, he found himself wondering? Had all of the demons fused into one? He became aware of wolves moving up beside him, knew without even looking that they, too, had utterly forgotten that Torren was their target.

But the demon, it seemed, had not. With a speed that was shocking for a creature so large, it came thundering forward, the great bulk of it crushing yet more trees. It was hard to make out its exact dimensions in the darkness, but it seemed to be built a little like a great swollen serpent, with an undulating belly that flexed and pulsed against the ground to press its great bulk forwards. Unlike a snake, though, the creature had at least a few limbs at its disposal. Torren darted out of the way as one great arm came crashing down onto the rock between him and the nearest of his pursuers, separating them. The demon struck again, its blows all focused on the other competitors, who had clumped protectively close together and were howling an urgent summons for backup.

Torren tore his eyes from the demon and glanced over his shoulder at the forest behind him. This was his chance to get away, to rely on this unprecedented distraction to make himself scarce in the jungle while his pack fought off this behemoth. He was so heavy with grief and exhaustion, so worn out...maybe his delirium was why it seemed to him for a moment as though the demon had separated him from his pursuers on purpose, dragging its body even more squarely between them.

Slip away into the trees, he heard his survival instinct begging. Leave the pack to deal with this monster. And then, like some graveyard hallucination, he heard Baltar's voice, clear as day in the depths of his mind.

*What, and let them have all the glory to themselves?
Not likely.*

Well, Torren thought faintly, he always had prided himself on his death wish. And without a second thought, he darted nimbly around the protective wall of the demon's outstretched limb, and raced in to join the fray on the side of the wolves who had just been seconds from ending his life.

But something was wrong. He dropped into formation with the wolves, who were struggling to fend off the demon's multi-limbed assault. He landed a bite or two, aiming to distract the beast and draw its focus away from the others... but the demon simply didn't take the bait. Again and again, he'd dart at it, trying to gain purchase with his jaws ...and again and again, the demon would simply pull away from him, before redoubling its efforts to kill the others. Frustration and confusion warred for dominance. He was trying to die a hero, damnit. Why was this stupid demon not letting him? Worse, too, he could hear the other wolves growling, and knew how this must look. The demon had appeared right when they'd been about to claim his life, and now it had waded into the battle like an ally.

Well, if the problem hadn't been solved by his first dozen reckless moves, he'd just have to escalate the situation. Torren shifted back to his human form, the night air cool against his sweat-damp skin as he roared a challenge and drew his sword from its scabbard. That got the demon's attention—the blade was still glinting with one of Syrra's enchantments, and when he swung it at a nearby limb the demon shrank away, hissing. But still it refused to strike him. He roared in frustration as he charged at it, only to feel a sinuous tentacle wrap around first one of his ankles, then the other, rooting him to the spot. He slashed at his bindings with the sword, but the tentacles were viscous and sticky, and he realized with horror

that the demon's flesh had hardened around the blade like glue. He couldn't pull his weapon clear.

Would he be forced to stand here and watch, immobilized, as this monster killed his entire pack in front of him? He stared up at it, his mind racing. Something was wrong. Something here wasn't adding up. What was he missing? For once in his reckless, stupid life he needed to *think* before he acted. The demon looked wrong. It was bigger than any he'd ever seen, for a start, but there was something else there, too. More of his pack were emerging from the woods to join the fray, spreading out around it in a wary semicircle...and he realized with a jolt what was so strange about the monster.

Like all demons, it was hideous to look at, its very existence wrong on some cosmic level. But it was also symmetrical. Its long body was an even cylinder, its great head a regular oval...even the dozen or so limbs with which it was striking at its prey were spaced evenly down its sides, each limb an exact match for one on its other side. No demon he'd ever seen had been composed with that kind of aesthetic concern. Symmetry was for wolves, not for demons. Even its facial features, monstrous and distorted as they were, were symmetrical. A wide mouth of gnashing teeth, two parallel slits for nostrils, and—another unusual feature—only two great eyes. Uncanny, to see them placed in such human-like positions on the demon's great head.

And then he realized what else was bothering him. From birth, wolf cubs were taught to watch the woods for pinpricks of red—the sign of a demon, watching from the undergrowth. Some demons might only have one or two eyes, some were absolutely covered in them, but they were always red. He had guessed that this particular demon was blind, or close to it, because he hadn't spotted a single blinking red welt on the beast's body. But a closer look showed him that the demon was blinking down at its prey with what were unmistakably two enormous eyes.

But not the red eyes of a demon. These eyes were a dull, glossy silver.

He shouted her name before his mind even had a chance to finish developing the impossible theory that that observation had sparked. He shouted it again and again when the beast's head whipped around to stare at him—he kept shouting it with a hoarse and straining voice when it knocked aside the other wolves with a few blows of its great limbs. The beast hunkered in close, great limbs forming an awful kind of cage around him, and slowly it lowered its face closer and closer to where he stood beneath it. The demon's head was twice his height, and its sinuous neck twisted and bulged as it opened its great jaws and roared so loudly and at such close range that he was deafened.

Torren dropped his sword and closed his eyes. And with what he fully expected to be his dying breath, he told Lethie he loved her.

His ears were still ringing after the demon's deafening roar, so he didn't hear the murmurs or gasps of his pack as they crept closer to the strange scene at the center of the demon-made clearing in the forest. Nor did he hear Syrra's voice as she emerged from the trees, gasping for breath, her white robes torn from her rapid journey through the forest. All he knew was that his arms were wrapped around a stiff, awkward body that was pressing itself against his chest so hard he thought he might have bruises later. Was he dead? It would make sense, for the love of your life to be waiting to greet you at the doors to the next world. He opened his eyes to see what the afterlife looked like, and felt momentarily disoriented when he saw the same dark forest, the ring of stunned-looking wolves who were shifting back to their two-legged forms one by one to get a better look. Reckless of them, he thought absent-mindedly. Hadn't there been a huge demon here a moment ago?

But the demon was gone. And when he finally looked down at the woman in his arms, he was stunned by the vivid,

lustrous silver eyes that he saw shining like beacons from a face that was otherwise as familiar as his own heartbeat.

Chapter 18 - Lethie

Through her delirium, the first thing Lethie knew was that Torren was safe. That by itself was such a relief that she was happy to accept her own death...happier still when she felt his arms around her, and realized that the world had granted her one last moment of utter bliss before she left it behind at last. If she'd known that shrugging off the mantle of demonic control was as simple as this, she'd have died years ago.

What had actually happened was hazy. She'd drawn what felt like the whole island's worth of demonic energy into herself, the band of corruption at her heart swelling and swelling until it filled her entire body and spilled over, and then she'd lost herself for a while, lost perspective. But she'd come sharply back to clarity when she'd felt Torren's fear, his desperation, burning like a torch at the corner of her vision. She'd knocked away the little wolves who dared to harm him, waited for the rest of his pack to show up, and then she'd positioned the weakest parts of her monstrous body right where his blade could reach them.

And then...and then...she realized, with a jolt of pure adrenaline, that she hadn't died. Quite the opposite. She was standing with her arms wrapped around Torren and her face buried in his chest, and when she looked up at him she realized his whole pack was assembled, bearing witness to their obvious embrace. She'd failed, she realized, her heart sinking. Far from exonerating him, she'd only given them more cause to believe he was a demon.

And then she heard a name she hadn't heard in years, spoken by a voice that sent a shockwave of memory cascading through her utterly chaos-wracked mind.

“Aletha?”

The unmistakable white of a lorekeeper's robes. The halting approach of someone who didn't believe their own

eyes. Lethie braced herself for what she'd fought so hard to avoid...the lorekeeper's gaze, boring right through every mask she'd ever assembled to the rot at her very heart. Somehow, the woman's magic had even told her what Lethie herself had forgotten—her full name, her old name, the name her comrades on Kurivon had called her by in the time she tried not to remember. The warmth of Torren's presence strengthened her enough to meet the lorekeeper's eyes.

Blue eyes. Blue eyes, in a face more lined with care than she remembered, but still undeniably hers. Blue eyes widened in an exact mirror of the shock and disbelief that Lethie felt. There was a soft thud as the lorekeeper's bone-handled blade slipped from her fingers and hit the soil, but Syrra had already thrown her arms around her, yanking her away from Torren with a terrifying strength. Was this it, Lethie wondered? Was the lorekeeper going to dispense with magic entirely and just kill her by crushing her ribs? She'd be able to do it, too. Of all the lorekeepers on Kurivon, Syrra always had been the strongest.

"It's you," her old friend whispered into her ear like a prayer. "It's you, it's you, it's really you."

"You died," Lethie pointed out reasonably, her whole world falling apart. "You're dead."

"You're one to talk!" Syrra pulled back, her blue eyes shining with tears, one hand pressed to her mouth to repress what Lethie quickly realized was laughter. "I can't believe this. You must have thought—no, Aletha, we held them off. They left the library standing and I was able to defend it until Halforst sent reinforcements." Syrra reached out and grabbed Torren's shoulder, shaking the utterly nonplussed-looking wolf as if to prove her point.

"You know each other," Torren managed. He swayed a little on his feet, and Lethie went to steady him—just in time for Syrra to smack him so hard on the other shoulder that he yelped in protest. "What was *that* for?"

"You didn't tell me who she was!"

“Yes, I did!”

“This is *Aletha!*” Syrra bellowed, more animated than Lethie could remember seeing her. “This woman protected the old settlement on Kurivon with her life. She—and the dozens who died—are why I am alive. Why my children are alive. You—Aletha, how?”

The joy at seeing Syrra was short-lived. Lethie braced herself. “You don’t know?” she said faintly, gesturing at herself. Syrra took her in, blue eyes narrowing with impatience.

“What should I know from the sight of you? That you’re in need of a few good meals and a comb?”

She was acutely aware of Torren’s eyes on her, on the stunned wolf pack gathered a few paces away, as though the trio at the center of the clearing were performing some kind of play for their benefit. It was ridiculous, how hard she found it to speak the truth. Even after everything they’d been through, it was still an effort to force her tongue to unglue itself from the roof of her mouth. “I survived because they offered me a choice—corruption or death—and I chose wrong.” She took a deep breath. “I’m a demon. And I’m—I can’t begin to express how sorry I am for what I’ve done to all of you, so I won’t insult you. Only know that—that I willingly accept my fate.”

“You’re not,” Syrra said blankly. Lethie had closed her eyes to await the fatal strike of an enchanted weapon, but snapped them open again. Some kind of unkind joke? But Syrra wasn’t laughing. “You’re not. Truly. First day of lorekeeper training,” she added with a strange little smile, tapping the skin beside her bright blue eyes. “I know a demon when I see one.”

“My heart—” Lethie started, lifting a hand to her chest as if to point out the band of corruption that had been her constant passenger for so many years. That was when she realized why she felt so delirious, so light-headed, so off-balance. “What?”

“I can see Rochmar glowing like a lighthouse,” Syrra said, gesturing at the island around them. “But you’re a dead spot, Aletha. As are you, Torren,” she added, a sharper note of surprise entering her voice. “Completely clear, even of the traces we talked about.”

“Senior Lorekeeper.” Ditha’s voice split the night like a blade. She moved forward gingerly, pressing hard on a wound in her side, but her voice didn’t shake or tremble when she addressed the trio. “We need an explanation.”

“Get in line,” the lorekeeper said faintly, then seemed to remember herself. “Apologies to you Ditha, and to the pack,” she said, glancing around the mystified semicircle of onlookers. “But I don’t have many answers at all right now. What I can tell you is that neither of these wolves is showing any sign of demonic affliction.”

The pack didn’t look especially keen to believe it, Lethie reflected, watching the way they exchanged worried glances with each other. She knew how they felt. She didn’t believe it either, if she was honest. How could she possibly be free of demonic rot? How could Syrra possibly refer to her as a wolf, and mean it? She hadn’t been a wolf for years, not since she’d given herself over to her masters. She tried to feel for that sense of contact with the demonic taint embedded in Rochmar’s soil, then felt her balance waver as she realized with another jolt of surprise that there was no trace of it. She was utterly alone in her body.

“I hereby call off the trial,” Ditha said, looking around at the rest of the pack, who were nodding agreement. “These two will be held under guard, though, until such time as the Senior Lorekeeper is able to attain a full understanding of what has happened here.” Her voice was steely, her dignity unassailable...but when the shellshocked group began the slow walk back to camp, Lethie heard Ditha deep in conversation with Syrra, discussing the battle in which Lethie had saved the lives of Syrra and her children. The memories came a lot easier to her mind now, and she felt another wave of dizziness, Torren steadying her automatically with a hand

on her elbow. He hadn't allowed them to physically separate since she'd come back to herself to find his arms wrapped around her, as if he was worried that if he let her go she might disappear. Not an unreasonable fear, on such a deeply strange night.

But they had to face separation when they returned to camp. Lethie found herself held in the large tent where all of this had started, perched awkwardly on the edge of her cot and wishing she wasn't far too anxious to sleep. At last, someone came to retrieve her, and she was heartened by the fact that the young wolf managed to give her a small smile before escorting her to the firepit. There, Syrra was waiting for her, looking absolutely exhausted, but still somehow delighted to see her.

"Right," the lorekeeper said simply, once she'd sat down. "Tell me everything."

Lethie hadn't imagined it would be possible. After years of suppressing every memory that caused her pain, she'd imagined that there was no record left of those dark days at the end of the settlement. But when she spoke, starting with the fragments she remembered, she was shocked by how quickly it all came rushing back. The steadily intensifying onslaught of demonic assaults, the way the community had realized, far too late, that there weren't enough soldiers to keep them all safe... she found herself telling every story she remembered, even the ones Syrra had been there for, so full of rediscovered joy and grief that she couldn't stop herself from spilling everything that had happened. Finally, she reached the last part, the part that shamed her the most...the part where she'd given herself over to the demons.

"I felt it," she whispered, pressing a hand to her chest. "I swear, Syrra, this wasn't some idle fantasy. This was real corruption—corruption I used to manifest demons, to steer negative emotions...to try to destroy this pack. And I almost succeeded." Another tear rolled down her cheek. Shocking, how freely her emotions were coming. "It must still be there."

“I’ve heard about what you’re describing,” Syrra said, leaning forward to squeeze her hands. “I believe you, Lethie.” She smiled a little at her old friend’s acceptance of her nickname. For now, at least, it was the name she preferred. “I believe that you carried that weight all these years, and I believe that you did awful things in the service of demons. But now I need you to believe me that it’s gone.”

“I’m frightened to,” she admitted, feeling a strange urge to laugh. “I’m afraid it’ll come back if I let myself believe it’s gone.” She sighed. “But—how? I thought it was permanent. I thought…” How could she explain the way it had felt, to live without hope? To live like someone who’d already died? But Syrra had survived alone among demons for years, she reminded herself. Syrra likely understood more than she thought.

“Don’t tell him I said this,” Syrra said quietly after a few moments had passed. “His ego may never recover. But I suspect that Torren may have had something to do with it.” She heard herself laugh, a sound that was slowly beginning to feel less strange. But Syrra’s sharp eyes didn’t leave her face. “Go on. Say it.”

“Say what?”

Syrra made a sound of exasperation. “Those demons really did interfere with your intelligence. The woman I knew would’ve put two and two together a long time ago. I heard his story too, remember? He told me about the monster you made of yourself. And he told me what he said to you to bring you back to us.”

Lethie was quiet for a long moment. “I thought I’d dreamed that.”

“You didn’t,” Syrra said, a smile playing about her lips. “I think the two of you should talk.”

She was halfway to her feet before she winced, remembering that the three of them weren’t the only wolves in the camp. “I have to talk to the pack, I have to—”

“Leave that to me.” Syrra hid a yawn behind her hand. “I’ve heard from both of you now, and they might prefer to hear the situation from a third party. I can’t promise they’ll be thrilled to see you tomorrow, but I can at least ensure they won’t break into the tent to cut both your heads off. He’s in there,” she added, nodding toward the familiar silhouette of Torren’s tent. “Go.”

It was quiet, as she walked across the sand towards the tent where the love of her life, somehow, was waiting for her. It was a quiet that came not just from the stillness of the night, or the fact that most of the pack had long since given in to their exhaustion after what felt like it had been several weeks but had in truth been one very, very long night. No—the quiet that she felt was in the beating of her heart, the quiet pulsing of blood around her body. The more she listened to her own heartbeat, the more she felt like she might just be able to bring herself to believe what the lorekeeper had told her. Maybe—just maybe—her demon masters hadn’t been telling her the truth when they’d said their hold over her was permanent and irreversible.

Or maybe they’d only thought they were telling the truth. Maybe when they told her she could never escape them, they hadn’t been betting that she was going to meet her soulmate.

Part of her didn’t really believe he’d be in the tent. She’d been waiting for the other shoe to drop for hours, ever since she’d managed to wake from that strange fugue state to find Torren alive and unhurt and an old friend from her past back from the dead. Lethie couldn’t remember the last time she’d gone this long without something horrible happening to her. But when she slipped into the tent, she saw the shape of him at once, wrapped up in the quilt on the bed with his chest rising and falling rhythmically in the lamplight. He was alive, she thought, so full of the unfamiliar sensation of wonder that her chest physically ached with it as she approached the bed. He was alive, and so was she.

And even if the pack decided to put both of them to death when they woke, the simple opportunity to spend the night asleep beside him was almost enough to bring her to tears.

He didn't stay asleep for long, of course. She did her best to slip quietly into the bed, knowing he needed his rest, but by the time she was halfway into the bed he was already moving, his arms wrapping around her and drawing her irresistibly into his warm, sleepy embrace. He was still mostly asleep, she realized with a grin, nestling with a sigh into the warmth of his chest. It wasn't until she grunted a little at the pressure of his arms—was he trying to crush her to death, after all the trouble it had taken to keep them both alive?—that his eyes flicked open, and they both lay very still for a long moment, gazing into each other's eyes.

“Your eyes are different,” he said at last, his voice fuzzy with sleep but still full of wonder.

“I'm cured,” she whispered, barely believing it herself. “No more corruption.”

“Syrra's the best lorekeeper I know.”

She shook her head. “Syrra didn't do anything. You did. You cleared the demonic taint out of my heart.”

That seemed to confuse him. “I can't do that,” he said blankly. “I'm no lorekeeper, Lethie. All I can do with a demon is cut its head off. What you're talking about would need magic.”

“You *are* magic, Torren,” she said, exasperated that she had to spell it out so clearly. “You did it because we're soulmates.” She'd spent hours building up the courage to say that word aloud, worried she'd falter at the crucial moment. Torren could at least have had the good grace to look surprised. Instead, that gorgeous grin of his just spread more widely across his face.

“Oh, I know.”

“You know,” she repeated blankly, her eyes narrowing.

“Figured it out ages ago. It’s great that you’ve caught up.”

She’d expected a lot of feelings to come up during this conversation, Lethie reflected as he grinned at her with that lazy, unrepentant light in his impossibly beautiful silver eyes. She hadn’t really been expecting undiluted rage to be among them, if she was honest. She moved towards him then, feeling like the whole world had slowed right down, and he ought to have counted himself lucky that at the last minute, Lethie thought of a better idea than murdering him in cold blood.

Strange, how quickly the touch of his lips made her forget how tired she’d been. A scant few minutes ago, all she’d wanted was to curl up next to him and sleep for about a thousand years. But kissing him distracted her from all the aches and pains that had been dogging her, and in what felt like no time at all she couldn’t even remember feeling anything but wide awake and absolutely focused on Torren. There was a new sweetness between them at odds with the almost violent passion of their first night together, a willingness to linger at the end of each long, lazy kiss, but the heat in her body was no less intense than it had been back then. If anything, her desire for him had only been sharpened by the memory of what it was like to feel his body under her hands, of exactly what those smirking lips were capable of doing to her...she shivered a little as his arms drew her close, feeling every point of contact between them burning. For all Torren’s attempts to play it cool, she could feel the tension in his body too, feel him responding to the friction between their bodies, and when she pressed her hips against his she heard him stifle a groan at the pressure against his cock, already hard and straining for attention.

But it felt so good, taking their time like this. Aware of his arousal, she kissed her way down his jaw, even the faint brush of his stubble sending a pleasant shiver down her spine. His hands had quickly slipped beneath the tattered shirt she was still wearing, and she obliged him by wriggling quickly out of it, pleased to be immediately rewarded by the warmth of

his hands on her ribs, his fingertips teasing gently at the sensitive buds of her nipples.

But she didn't intend to let him distract her as he had last time...as pleasant as that distraction had been. There would be time later, she realized, and the pure joy of that thought made her briefly dizzy. Torren murmured a soft query into her ear, the low rumbling of his voice making her shiver, and she kissed him to reassure him that she was fine. Fine was a gross understatement, in fact. A few hours ago, she'd been readying herself for death, and now she was in bed with the most gorgeous man in the world in her arms and the impossible luxury of time to enjoy his company, his lips, his hands...no words could do her joy justice, she knew.

She'd just have to show him how she felt instead.

They were both naked now, the unnecessary blankets kicked down to the end of the bed as they drew all the warmth they needed from each other. It meant that his hands could roam unimpeded across every inch of her body, and she lost herself to the feeling of it, pressing herself up against every touch of his hands, moaning when he passed over particularly sensitive places. The pleasure was only intensified by the knowledge that her body was completely her own again...no echo of corruption in the beat of her heart, no poison in the blood that flushed her cheeks as Torren's hands drew undiluted pleasure from her body. He took his time moving to where she wanted him most, hands sliding across her thighs with a lazy, deliberately easy pace, so that when he finally slid an exploratory finger along the slick outer lips of her sex, the spike of arousal made her bury her face in his neck to muffle her moaning. His fingers explored more deeply, and she clung to him, grinding her hips helplessly against his hand, the fire in her belly expanding to fill her whole body as he stroked the bud of her clitoris, slid his fingers deeply inside her and found the place where the slightest pressure made her lose all control. She lost all semblance of control of the situation, grinding her hips helplessly against him and whimpering desperate pleas in his ear...her eyes were closed, but somehow

she still knew that he was smirking that smug, knowing smirk of his, the one that drove her utterly insane.

She writhed in his grip, thrashed her body, hooked one leg around him and yanked him closer in a desperate, wordless entreaty. The low chuckle he uttered struck a kind of delicious fear into her heart. Was this to be his revenge, she wondered as he withdrew his fingers from her aching sex, agonizingly, deliberately slowly? Would he tease her all night, withholding what she so desperately wanted until she lost her mind altogether? After what she'd put him through, that kind of erotic torture was the least she deserved...her body was shivering, aching for him, utterly at his mercy. Her eyes slid open, and she looked up at him, his eyes glowing in the lamplight as he gazed down at her body beneath him with a reverent yet deeply erotic hunger.

And then, merciful as a saint, he leaned down to claim her lips in a searing, passionate kiss—and in almost the same moment, she felt the head of his cock part the heat of her folds and he buried himself inside her. How was it possible that their bodies fitted together so perfectly? How could such a simple thing feel so unbelievably good? She clung to him, every muscle in both of their bodies working in perfect harmony toward the simple goal of pleasure, of driving them both closer and closer to their climax with each steady, powerful thrust. She could no sooner have held back the rising swell of her orgasm than she could have held back the ocean itself, and the low rumble of his groaning against the skin of her throat told her that Torren was right there with her. She had no idea how long they lingered there, moving slowly but inexorably toward that peak...but she knew that when they finally reached the point of no return, they crashed over the edge together.

And it was together, still shivering a little in the afterglow of their ecstasy, that the two of them tangled each other in their arms and fell into the deep, dreamless sleep of two people who'd finally found the greatest peace of their lives.

Chapter 19 - Torren

Torren shielded his eyes from the sun overhead with one hand, gazing around the clearing he was standing in with a mixture of pride and exhaustion. To the uninformed, it might have been easy to underestimate the size of the achievement he was surveying, but Torren knew exactly how much blood, sweat and tears had gone into clearing this small patch of jungle. Quite a bit of it had been his own, in fact. After all, an Alpha couldn't be seen to be shirking the work he was asking his pack to do. And having nearly lost that title two months ago—not to mention his life in the bargain—Torren was determined to spend every day showing his pack that they'd been right to change their minds. He knew it would still take time to completely regain their trust, and once he might have chafed impatiently at the slow progress he was making, but patience was a virtue that Torren was working hard on cultivating.

“About a third of the way there, I'd say,” came a soft voice. Two months of her constant company hadn't reduced the dizzy thrill he felt every time he set eyes on her—nor was he any better at containing the stupid grin that always spread across his face. It was downright embarrassing, of course, and had made him a laughing stock in the eyes of his pack, but something about the way they smiled when they teased him told him there was no real venom in it.

He shook his head, hopping down from the tree stump he'd been standing on to press a quick kiss to the top of Lethie's head. Her dark, silky hair was held back in a braid far too complex for her impatient fingers to have been responsible for—she must have spent the morning with Azur. He'd expected it to take months or even years for the pack to accept Lethie as his mate, if they ever did; part of him had worried that they'd refuse, that he and Lethie would have to leave the pack altogether. But he hadn't reckoned on how much his

soulmate would come out of her shell in the weeks and months that had followed the night of the final trial.

Looking at her now, it was hard to imagine that she was the same person as that awkward, hostile, tense woman with the matted hair who'd stared right through him on the beach that day. With the demonic rot purged from her heart, she glowed with health—her body had quickly packed on all the flesh and muscle she'd been missing. Her skin was clear, her eyes were bright, and she had more energy than she knew what to do with. She'd rise early every morning to train with the pack, she'd work tirelessly all day, and she was always the last to go to bed at night, her mind alive with plans for the future. He couldn't have asked for a better partner in leadership...or a more exciting, curious, beautiful mate to share his heart with.

“What're you looking at?” He felt her prod him in the chest, realizing he'd let his mind run away with him again.

“Oh, just getting suspicious about how lucky I got,” he said, glancing around the clearing to see if they'd be interrupted before pulling her into his arms. She laughed softly and allowed him to hold her close, resting his chin atop her head.

“Suspicious, huh?”

“Yep. You? Us? All this? Too good to be true. Can't fool me, demon. I'm wise to your tricks.” He paused for a moment. “Too soon for demon jokes?”

He could tell she was considering this. “Nah,” she said finally, and he could hear the smile in her voice. “Baltar never believed in ‘too soon.’ I think he'd have been making jokes right through that first meeting, when the pack voted to reinstate you as Alpha.”

“Are you kidding? There'd have been no vote with Baltar around. He'd have made himself Alpha before anyone could think twice,” Torren said, laughing. It still hurt to think about his friend, to look around at everything they'd achieved

and know that Baltar wasn't there to see it. But he still liked to remember him. Lethie, too, was slowly beginning to talk about some of the people she'd lost...helped, of course, by her friendship with Syrra, who was making regular visits to Rochmar now. With her help, Torren had mended relations with the Council of Alphas back on Kurivon. There had even been talk of a few of the more battle-hungry wolves of Kurivon joining them here on Rochmar to help with the ongoing war against the demons.

"Can't believe there are going to be houses on Rochmar," Lethie said softly, leaning into his embrace as they looked around the clearing. "I don't know if I know how to sleep anywhere that's not a tent."

"We'll learn together," he said, pressing a quick kiss to her cheek and smiling at her faint hum of approval. "Besides, it'll be a while until we've cleared enough space to start building...I'm afraid you'll be stuck in the tent with me a little while longer."

"Terrible fate," Lethie agreed lazily. "Maybe the demons will take me back if I ask them nicely enough." She grinned at him cheekily as she pulled herself out of his embrace, and before he could retort, she reached up to claim his lips in a quick kiss. A dirty tactic, he always felt. He couldn't be witty when he was so thoroughly distracted, and she knew it.

Torren watched as Lethie moved away across the clearing where one day soon, his pack would build permanent homes to call their own. He wondered, not for the first time, how he could ever have thought that settling down in one place was a fate worse than death. Then again, context was everything. And he'd never in a million years have been able to imagine that someone as wonderful as Lethie would be part of the picture. The pack often teased Lethie about winning Torren's heart in the Soulmate Games. But every time he looked at her, Torren was reminded that he was the one who'd brought home the best prize of all.

He might have changed his mind about domestic life, but if anything, it had only made his future more exciting. Torren knew there would still be plenty of daring battles with the malevolent demonic force on this island, still more than enough danger and excitement to keep his adrenaline pumping and each day full of sparks. Because every day, he'd be fighting with Lethie right there by his side.

Every day, he'd be fighting not just for glory, but for the love of his life.

THE END

About the Author

Kayla Wolf is a mom of two, an obsessive reader and a total sucker for paranormal romance. Sexy shifters, sassy women, steamy encounters, and dangerous enemies are the things that make her lie awake at night. Whenever she thinks about these things, she just has to get up and write about them immediately... Come on in, and spoil the beast in you.

Check out her [author page on Amazon](#) and be sure to click “Follow” to get new release updates.

Also [check out the Wolf Sisters on Facebook](#) for more news and hot offers.

Books by The Wolf Sisters

(Most books are FREE with Kindle Unlimited)

Books by Kayla Wolf:

“Alpha Wolf Island” Series

A group of alpha wolves has arrived on the island of Kurivon. They’re here to claim the land, own the sea, and win their mate’s hearts. They don’t compromise, they don’t negotiate, and they always get what they want...

[The Alpha’s Secret Twins](#)

[The Alpha’s Arranged Mate](#)

[The Alpha’s Betrayed Mate](#)

[The Alpha’s Mail Order Bride](#)

[The Alpha’s Forbidden Mate](#)

* * *

“Zodiac Dragons” Series

The Zodiac Dragons series takes place in a wild and dangerous parallel world. In a howling gray void of fog and entropy, shifters have to find the bonfires in the darkness, where magic, love, and long lost mates are hidden...

[Gemini Dragon](#)

[Capricorn Dragon](#)

[Virgo Dragon](#)

[Scorpio Dragon](#)

[Libra Dragon](#)

[Sagittarius Dragon](#)

* * *

“Wolves of Sunny Rock” Series

Sunny Rock is a place of darkness and light, of wolf shifters and magic, of soulmates and inescapable fate. Come here, and the starry desert sky will show you what love can do... if only you let it.

[Shattered Wolf](#)

[Bully Wolf](#)

[Cursed Wolf](#)

[Wounded Wolf](#)

* * *

“Everglades Dragon Daddies” Series

You know that feeling of being dragged into a swamp? The complete powerlessness of being pulled into whatever fate has in store for you? Now imagine the swamp being full of blistering hot guys... And not just any guys. No, dragons, in every size, shape, and form, to take you in and make you theirs... Isn't that a swamp you'd gladly be sucked into?

Welcome to the thick, wet heat of the Everglades...

[Daddy Dragon](#)

[Doctor Dragon](#)

[Professor Dragon](#)

[Ranger Dragon](#)

[Single Daddy Dragon](#)

[Officer Dragon](#)

[Mentor Dragon](#)

[Firefighter Dragon](#)

[Midlife Dragon](#)

[Best Friend Dragon](#)

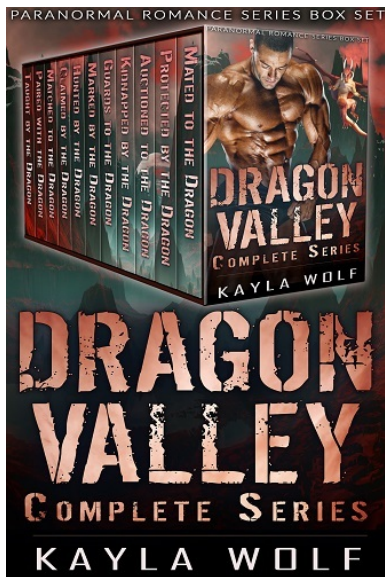
* * *

[“Dragon Valley” Series](#)

Dragon Valley keeps a secret that no one knows about: Dangerously sexy and muscled dragons have made the valley their home. But their existence is at risk. They need to find a mate or else their time might be up. Will the dragons find their mates?

“Dragon Valley” is a paranormal romance series that consists of standalone stories that each have a satisfying HEA. The books are connected through the dragons that live in the valley.

[OUT NOW: Dragon Valley Complete Series](#) SAVE more than 75% compared to the standalone books



Standalone books in the series:

Prequel: [Married Off to the Dragon](#)

[Mated to the Dragon](#)

[Protected by the Dragon](#)

[Auctioned to the Dragon](#)

[Kidnapped by the Dragon](#)

[Guards to the Dragon](#)

[Marked by the Dragon](#)

[Hunted by the Dragon](#)

[Claimed by the Dragon](#)

[Matched to the Dragon](#)

[Paired with the Dragon](#)

[Taught by the Dragon](#)

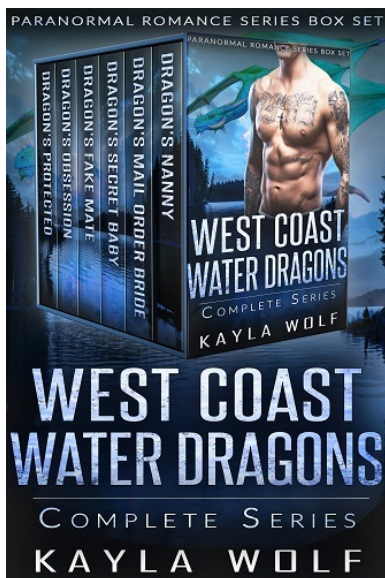
* * *

[“West Coast Water Dragons” Series](#)

Have you ever visited the peninsula of the Water Dragons? You will have to look hard for it, because the dangerously hot dragons living here want to keep it a secret from anyone but you... Yes, you read that right: you are invited on a wild ride by the most attractive men on the West Coast (and that's saying something with Liam Hemsworth around...). So pack your bags, because you're going on an adventure to a very secret place. Bless the woman who gets lost here...

“West Coast Water Dragons” is a paranormal romance series consisting of stand-alone stories, each with a HEA, that are connected through the dragons who live on the peninsula.

[OUT NOW: West Coast Water Dragons Complete Series](#)
SAVE more than 70% compared to the standalone books



Standalone books in the series:

[Dragon's Nanny](#)

[Dragon's Mail Order Bride](#)

[Dragon's Secret Baby](#)

[Dragon's Fake Mate](#)

[Dragon's Obsession](#)

[Dragon's Protected](#)

The “West Coast Water Dragons” series is a spin-off of the “Dragon Valley” series.

* * *

“City of Dragons” Series

The City of Dragons is the place of your dreams. Red-hot dragons left, right, and center, waiting for you to explore the concrete jungle with them. Are you ready to enter this city of fantasy, where mates, magic, and more await?

[**Dragon King**](#)

[**Dragon Player**](#)

[**Dragon Prince**](#)

[**Dragon Mate**](#)

[**Dragon Billionaire**](#)

[**Dragon Roommate**](#)

[**Dragon Boss**](#)

Start reading book 1 of the “City of Dragons” series now:



* * *

Books by Mia Wolf:

“Silverdale Wolves” Series

Silverdale Wolves is a sizzling paranormal romance series where delicious wolf shifters compete for rank, respect and women. These strong males are possessive, demanding ... and very seductive. Once they've identified their mate, they won't allow anyone or anything to get in the way...

[Alpha's Mate](#)

[Wolf's Mate](#)

[Beta's Mate](#)

[Shifter's Mate](#)

[Demon Wolf's Mate](#)

[Bully Wolf's Mate](#)

[Daddy's Mate](#)

[Pregnant Wolf's Mate](#)

* * *

“Dragon Billionaire Mountain” Series

Somewhere on earth, there is a mystical mountain where a billionaire dragon shifter can unlock his powers...but in order to do that, he has to find his mate. Because money can buy things, but dragon love can conquer hearts...

[Platinum Dragon](#)

[Steel Dragon](#)

[Silver Dragon](#)

[Gold Dragon](#)

[Palladium Dragon](#)

[Ruthenium Dragon](#)

* * *

“Menage Dating Agency for Shifters” Series

Have you ever wanted not just one, but two mates? Two hot shifters to claim you, protect you, and make you melt? Two guys to enjoy cool days, hot nights, and steamy encounters with? If your answer is a resounding yes (and let’s face it, why would it be a no?) then sign up for the Menage Dating Agency for Shifters and fulfill your wildest dreams and fantasies...

[Double Alphas](#)

[Double Pumas](#)

[Double Wolves](#)

* * *

“Double Desert Shifters” Series

What if I told you that deep in the desert is a place that all women dream of? A place where every woman is loved by two men, and where curves are like a gift from the gods? Would you stay home? Or would you come with me to check out the Double Desert Shifters?

Double Desert Shifters is a paranormal menage romance series. The stories are standalones, each with a HEA.

[OUT NOW: Double Desert Shifters Complete Series](#) SAVE more than 70% compared to the standalone books



Standalone books in the series:

[My Two Alphas](#)

[My Two Wolves](#)

[My Two Dragons](#)

[My Two Bears](#)

[My Two Lions](#)

[My Two Mates](#)

[My Two Tigers](#)

[My Two Beasts](#)

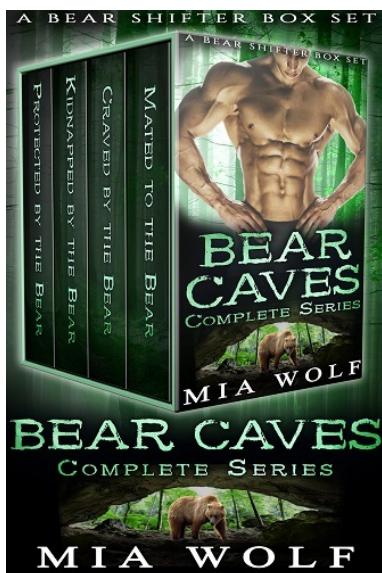
* * *

“Bear Caves” Series

Come visit the Bear Caves, a mysterious village where bear shifters live far removed from humans. This village, with its caves and its festivals houses not just any bears. No, it houses Very Sexy bears, who are not easy to please, but who will protect their mates with their lives without question.

The Bear Caves series consists of stand-alone stories that are connected through the bears who live in the village. Each story has a guaranteed satisfying HEA.

[OUT NOW: Bear Caves Complete Series](#) SAVE 25% compared to the standalone books



Standalone books in the series:

[Mated to the Bear](#)

[Craved by the Bear](#)

[Kidnapped by the Bear](#)

[Protected by the Bear](#)

* * *

[“Wolf Mountain” Series](#)

Come with me to Wolf Mountain, a village with hot, single wolves who are strong, muscled, and ... single. They don't need a mate. They don't want a mate. Until they meet the one they will die to protect...

Wolf Mountain is a paranormal romance series consisting of stand-alone stories, each with a HEA, that are connected

through the wolves who live in the village.

[Werewolf's Surrogate](#)

[Werewolf's Second Chance](#)

[Werewolf's Prisoner](#)

Start reading book 1 of the “Wolf Mountain” series now:

