

Acceptance of the Self

Book 1: Attunement of the Hearts

Chapter 47.s - Interrogation

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Sky

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[- Monday?, September ~16, 2019 - ??? ?m - Prison Cell -]

I'm cold, and hungry. There's no day/night cycle in the cell and I've lost all sense of time.

The 'guards' have dropped food off five times now, and ignored every nagging question I'd thrown at them while they were at it. The food is not too bad, it kinda seems like cafeteria fare to me?

Five meals. If they're not trying to starve me or psychologically fuck with me, that could mean I've been here a day and a half or so, maybe more.

Ugh, if only I'd stopped Eve from meeting with Drew! I'd gotten bad vibes from that individual from the moment Eve first told me about faer, even though fae used the coolest set of pronouns I'd seen in the wild in a long time. But no, I'd gone against my gut, and now I was here. In this cell, separated from my friends and family AND all my tech.

Gods, I hope my dads or Dawn have found my phone by now. It isn't too much to hope for, right?

I grumble to myself, turning over in the tiny little cot with its threadbare blanket and willing myself back to sleep.

I'm awakened from a nightmarish sleep by the sound of the giant bolt in the cell door being slid back. I flinch away from it, then roll off the cot bolted to the far wall of the cell and onto my feet. A second later the door swings open, I hear a *click*, and I'm blinded by the bright white light of a flashlight pointed right at my face.

I squint into the blinding light defiantly, a scowl on my face, as boots stomp into the room: three sets by my count. Two burly figures take positions on either side of me as the third one holding the flashlight stops just in front of me. The flashlight *clicks* off, leaving me temporarily blind once more as my eyes adjust.

A frowning white man-looking person with green eyes and short close-cropped golden blonde hair looms over me. Two large muscled masses stand to either side of me.

"About fucking time someone showed up," I say as calmly as I can manage, craning my neck to look up at this dude.

Gotta keep them on the back foot, I think nervously to myself.

The green eyes narrow as they scan me up and down. "My apologies for keeping you waiting, Sky Anderson," my captor says. Their voice makes my skin crawl. It's utterly devoid of emotion. Flat, monotone, and nasally.

"What the hell do you want?" I ask, carefully hiding my surprise that they know my name. Of course they do, they have my wallet at the very least, not to mention whatever kind of information BPI might be able to dig up on me with facial and fingerprint recognition software alone these days.

"I want your cooperation. Nothing more, nothing less."

"Well you're shit out of luck, bud," I retort.

“Enough. We’re not having this conversation here,” green eyes says curtly. “Shut your mouth if you want to avoid getting the shit kicked out of you.”

I blink, scowling deeper. “Thanks for the advice, oh captor my captor,” I say.

“Gentlemen, if you would,” the blonde says.

Two hands roughly grab me by the upper arms and lift me off the ground.

“He-EEY!” I yelp. “Put me down! I’ll cooperate! Gods-”

I’m roughly dropped to the ground at a nod from green-eyes.

“Ouch!” I cry.

“Follow me and be silent until I say otherwise,” they say.

I don’t hide the contempt on my face as I nod quietly.

Green eyes turns on their black booted heel and marches out of the room. I’m roughly shoved forward by thing one beside me, and I fall into step behind the apparent leader of this little soirée.

My eyes dart around as soon as I’m past the door of the cell, taking in the shiny new concrete of the floors, walls, and ceiling of the hallway around us. I’ve been held captive here for at least a few days, but haven’t had anyone come into my cell until now. Food had been delivered through a little lockable doggy door in the bottom of the cell door. I hadn’t had any view outside the cell when I got here, as they’d knocked me out with something after wrestling me into the back of the BPI van. I’d awakened sore and bruised in my cell, and hadn’t had a glimpse outside it till now.

The ceiling in this hallway is a foot or two above the tallest guy’s head, with wires running all along the center of it and several cameras visible up and down the corridor. I follow closely behind the blonde guy as they turn left and lead me down past door after identical cell door. All the doors have little lights above them, either red or green, and they seem to indicate whether the cell’s locked or not.

We walk swiftly down the corridor while I carefully inspect my captors. Thing one and thing two are both burly men-looking folks with oodles of muscle who could probably punt me like a football. The two brutes are wearing what appears to be black, scuffed up combat armor along with jeans and long sleeve black sweaters underneath. I note they don't appear to be carrying weapons aside from the small taser guns.

The person in charge strides forth in a dark green military-looking uniform with a strangely shaped collar. It's a normal circular flat collar in the front just below chin height, but at the back a triangular portion of the tough collar fabric juts up sharply, hiding their neck and some of the back of their head from view.

The leader, Blondie I decide to call them, opens up a green-lit door on the right and beckons me inside.

There's a single table in the middle of the room with two chairs on either side facing each other, and what is no doubt a one-way mirrored window reflects back a disheveled looking me on the right side of the room.

"Have a seat," Blondie says shortly, walking around to the other side of the table and pulling out the cheap looking wooden chair there

I shrug and, seeing no other viable course of action, comply: sitting in the chair close to me and scooching it closer to the table.

"Thank you," Blondie says.

"Can I talk yet?" I ask sardonically.

"No," they say firmly.

I take in a breath to reply, but they're already talking again in that voice that sounds like they're sentencing me to death.

"You, Sky Anderson, were born in the USA on June ninth in the year two thousand to Hannah Sylvan and Jake Atha, whom you lived with for four years before they abandoned you in the parking lot of a Denny's. Cameron and Cammie Housde found you and took you to Sunrise

Boulevard orphanage where you stayed for the next year. You left that orphanage for violently retaliating to bullies over infractions that otherwise would have gone unpunished.”

I feel my blood run cold. These people know that much about my life story? I’d thought I was just a snack for Eve that they picked up for collaborating with her. But the idea that they did all this research on me just to kill me doesn’t make any sense. I must have some use to them, but what?

Blondie isn’t finished. “You were kicked around four other orphanages in the chicagoland area for the next six years, until Jay and Aiden Anderson picked you up in twenty eleven. There you’ve lived with them up to almost the present day. Does that all sound right? You may now speak.”

The question comes out of left field. They want *me* to confirm their research on me?

“Uhhh, no?” I hazard.

Blondie shrugs. “Suit yourself. Now that we’ve confirmed what lying looks like on you, we can move on to the real questions.”

I stare at them, hard.

“May I ask a question?” I say coolly, holding their green eyes with my own grey gaze.

“No,” Blondie replies.

“What are your pronouns?” I ask anyway.

They tense for a moment, their eyes flicking away from mine and back again quickly. “I beg your pardon?” they ask flatly.

“You know, should I call you she/her, they/them? Something else?” I press. “A name would be nice too.”

Blondie seems to balk at the question. “*She?*” they ask in a slightly strangled voice.

Then in a blink their surprise is gone, replaced by a cold indifference as their gaze sharpens onto my own. The voice that comes from their mouth is much lower and more menacing, "You will call me Sir and you will address me as he and him. That is all you need to know."

Woah, touchy subject? I think, my egg alarms going off. I wonder if I can somehow use this?

"Okay *sir*," I say aloud, snapping off a smartass salute. Blondie scowls.

"Why the fuck am I here?" I ask.

"You are in the custody of Blue Projects International and will remain that way indefinitely while we determine what to do with you. If you continue to be uncooperative, we may be forced to use extreme measures to ensure your compliance with company policy."

I raise a cyan eyebrow. "You have company policy for prisoners? None of this feels very legal," I reply skeptically.

"I think you will find laws have very little meaning to those in your position," the man says tersely.

I snort. "And what's my 'position', exactly?"

"You have two choices," the man says. He nods at one of the goons behind me, and I hear footsteps approach us. I tense as they get close, but instead of feeling those huge hands on me again I'm surprised to find a massive pile of paper is dropped on the desk in front of me. Where it came from I have no idea, until I spot the little table in the back right corner of the cell behind me after a quick glance over my shoulder.

"What the hell is this?" I ask, crossing my arms. There must be at least a hundred pages in the stack, maybe more.

At the top of the pile is a page with my name written in bolded letters across the top: my *full* name, Sky Axiothea Ada Amelia Anderson. *How the fuck can they know that?* I think frantically. *No one* knew that name, not even Eve!

“Choice one,” the man holds up a finger, pulling my attention away from the contract, “you read and sign this contract, you commit yourself to working full time for Blue Projects International, and you walk out of this cell a free person.”

I stare at him harder. “*That’s* why you kidnapped me off the street? You want me to *work* for you?” I ask incredulously.

“I admit it’s more generous an offer than I would give to you, but these are the terms,” he says. “Company policy.”

“And if I tell you to go suck eggs?” I say with a raised eyebrow.

He pauses for a moment, then holds up a second finger. “Option two is you get up out of that chair, turn around, and allow yourself to be guided back to your cell, where you will stay for the next few weeks, until you are shipped off to a proper holding facility. The choices following option two are severely limited and unpleasant.”

I suck in a breath, then turn my attention to the massive contract in front of me.

“So what, you’re gonna sit there and watch me while I read *War and Peace 2* here and decide if I want to sign my life away?” I ask.

“Yes,” he says simply.

“What if I have questions?”

“Ask, and I may answer,” he replies flatly.

I frown at him, then let my eyes drift down to the contract. I look at the page from a few different angles, trying to figure out how the enchantment on the page worked.

As far as I can remember, I’ve never even spoken my full name out loud, I’d only settled on Axiothea last week!

“How the fuck do you know that?” I ask tersely, pointing to my name.

“I’m afraid you’ll need to be more specific. Know what?” he replies with a raised eyebrow.

“My full name is private, there’s no way you could know it without some sort of mind reading bullshit. So what kind of mind-reading bullshit do you have?” I press, not really hoping for much in the way of an answer.

“The contract is a private agreement between you and the Company, it reacts to your thoughts, as you’ve surmised,” Blondie says. “Each contract is individualized to the person signing it. I think you’ll find that BPI is a *most* useful and generous benefactor to have.”

I snort, then start idly reading the terms set out before me. I don’t even intend to give the contract more than a second glance, but something about the document draws me in.

I keep reading.

The terms are... unbelievable. I sit there engrossed, doing calculations and commentary in my head as I read through this absolutely stellar job offering.

An hour passes, according to the clock on the wall behind my seated captor, then two.

One hundred and fifty thousand american dollars. That’s how much they’re offering to pay me, *per year*, to snoop on the supernatural community and report my findings back to them. And this can be *negotiated*. I am nineteen years old, and these people are talking about paying me more than both my dads’ salaries combined.

There are provisions for healthcare, dental, vision, car, and home insurance included in the contract, as well as a thorough diversity and inclusion section that sets a tiny portion of my angst about the company to rest. Oh sure they kidnapped and held me captive for several days, but did you know the company's board is a multicultural, multigendered, and multiracial body? Here they are offering to take care of me for life in exchange for a little espionage and intrigue to spice up said life.

They fully support trans people, are working to make amends for slavery via raises for people of color and better hiring practices, and have large sections of the contract dedicated to educating their employees on stuff like ageism, acephobia, fatphobia, and ableism, among many others. It also says they're a human first organization, which gets my hackles raised, but they go on to define that as putting their resources primarily towards solving human problems first, supernaturals' problems second. It's not that they disregard supernatural life, just that it isn't the organization's focus.

Yeah, right. I saw how they 'handled' Eve. *This thing will appear however I want it to, won't it?*

I flip through the middle sections again, searching for the catch. The fine print that will strip me of my rights should I dare raise a finger or say a word against the company. But I can't find it. This seems, for all the world, like a golden opportunity that I would be a fool to pass up. There's a standard NDA clause, so of course I can't tell anyone about what I'm doing without risking my job and a criminal charge, but what high paying job doesn't have something similar?

And all I'd have to do is be really sneaky. Come up with some plausible stories each time they check in on me. Misdirect them, protect people from getting abducted. I could, essentially, spy on them from the inside. All it would take is signing on the dotted line.

This is a really fucking desperate attempt to get my signature, I muse.

It's hard to stay focused, when just *looking* at the stupid paper gets me thinking all kinds of thoughts about what I could do with that kind of money. It takes me a while to parse it out, but it's kinda like the contract itself is whispering sweet nothings directly into my mind. Constantly suggesting how much better my life would be if I signed this document here and now.

"...is this for real?" I ask carefully, tearing my gaze away from the contract and up towards Blondie's green eyes.

"As real as you and me," he says flatly.

I hum, bouncing one of my legs with nervous energy. My eyes stray back to the contract.

One hundred and fifty thousand dollars. First paycheck *today* for four thousand five hundred thirty four american dollars. I could walk out of here with enough money to buy pretty much any single thing I could possibly want, and within a few years' time I could save up tens of

thousands. My dads could probably retire if they let me take care of them, which I would absolutely try to convince them to do.

Ellie and Maddie might have magic, Eve might have her vampirism, but those can only do so much in today's society. Money is a superpower in and of itself in this hell world we live in.

The contract explains why I had been chosen, too. I had an *in* to the supernatural community. BPI chose people like me, *collaborators*, to get close to the communities they were trying to work with. I don't really understand how kidnapping from said populations is 'working' with them, but it does assure me that Eve will not be harmed while I work for BPI, and that she will be returned to her family should I accept this job.

All I have to do is sign. Just how much power does my signature have?

I can try to turn around and break this deal the moment I'm free, and incur whatever consequences they impose upon me in exchange for getting Eve somewhere safe. I would be a real fool to stand up and turn around and go back to that cold and empty cell without signing this thing.

I sit back and really *think* about why I'm being offered this contract. I understand that it's meant to get me to sign, and I understand that names and signatures have power in the magical world. But I'm not sure how much power. And can a magic contract lie? Can the fine print be so small as to be invisible to the naked eye? Or enchanted so that I see whatever I want to see, when the real underlying deal is much more sinister in nature?

"What's the catch?" I ask idly.

Blondie frowns, like he's disappointed in me. "The catch is spending the rest of your life working for a company you previously despised, I suppose," he replies.

Oh, so just like any other job? I think sardonically.

"No I mean like, what sort of magical chains is this contract going to place on me and my free will when I sign it?" I ask.

Blondie frowns deeper, actually seeming to consider the question.

“None that you don’t willingly allow to be placed on yourself,” he says eventually.

“Oh great, how comforting,” I reply.

I pick up the pen next to the contract, and Blondie seems to visibly relax.

I twirl the pen idly around my fingers once, twice.

Then I set it back down, put my hands flat on the table, and push myself up to a standing position.

“Please take me back to my cell. I need time to think this over,” I announce.

“I’m afraid it doesn’t work like that,” Blondie says, his face emotionless. “You either sign this now, or you lose the opportunity to work for BPI forever. Also, we’ll keep you in custody for potentially the rest of your natural life.”

“You really want me that badly, huh?” I ask impertinently.

“I care nothing for you, child,” the man says grumpily. “But these are the terms as I am forced to offer them.”

Yeah right, I think. This whole thing is fucking insane.

“I’m not signing,” I say firmly.

Blondie nods calmly, “Raphael, if you would,” he says to the man standing behind me on my left.

Footsteps tromp closer, and I will myself not to tremble. Instead of hands on me however, a small blue digital tablet enters my field of vision as it is passed from the guard to Blondie. Blondie turns the thing to face me and sets it down on the table.

I hesitate, then quickly scan the screen to figure out what further tomfuckery is afoot.

It’s a picture of my dads’ house. Scratch that - it’s a live stream of my dads’ house, I can see people moving in the living room windows and there’s a little ‘LIVE’ indicator in the bottom right

of the screen. No cars on the driveway though, that's odd. Whoever's filming this must be staying in the neighbors' place across the street.

"We've been watching your family, Sky Anderson. If you refuse to sign on with us, we can make things *very bad* for them indeed."

"Carrot's not working, time for the cattle prod?" I suggest with a raised eyebrow, while internally I panic.

Are they going to kidnap my whole family to get me to sign this fucking thing? I wonder.

Blondie shrugs. "Something like that."

An idea suddenly occurs to me, and I reach out and snatch the tablet before Blondie can react.

It's a model I recognize, and I quickly swipe up with three fingers, hoping against hope that they haven't locked it into some prisoner-only mode.

To my delight, the time and date pops up in the top left of the screen. One pm on Tuesday September 17th, 2019.

I had been captured the night of the 14th, I think, so that meant it had been nearly three days I'd been held here.

The tablet is pulled roughly from my grasp by the well-manicured hand of Blondie, but not before I notice another crucial piece of information: I'm still in Downers Grave somewhere, if the weather widget is to be believed.

"That's *enough*," Blondie says, eyes hardening and voice lowering. "You will sign this contract or you will learn an important lesson in what BPI is capable of. Your fathers will lose their jobs, your brother will be expelled from school, and it's likely he'll never be hired--"

"*She*," I say harshly, latching on to the one thing I have a ready response to.

The man's eyes narrow, and a low growl emanates from his throat.

"*What?*" he asks irately.

"My *sister's* pronouns are *she/her*," I say.

Blondie's growl increases in volume for a moment, and he looks like he's about to start yelling, but he abruptly cuts off. The steel in his gaze lessens, and his posture shifts to be a bit more subdued.

"My apologies, Mx. Anderson," he says quietly. "It appears my information is out of date. But, still, I think you should be a bit more concerned about the threats I am making regarding your *sister* and your parents."

Yeah, that makes two of us, I think.

What harm could giving them my signature do, really?

The fae are known for stealing names, taking identities. I love me a good fantasy story with the fae in it, and I know *all too well* just what can be taken if one gets on their benefactor's bad side.

I shake my head. "You could tell me you were going to shoot my parents dead if I refuse to sign, and I still wouldn't do it," I say confidently, only about 45% sure of my angle here. "I worked *hard* for the name Sky, I *like* who I am! I'm not about to give it up just because you're pressuring me with illegal prison time and familial espionage."

Blondie grunts, both eyebrows rising. He stares at me for a short moment, perplexed. Almost... envious?

"Suit yourself," he says softly. Then, louder and with more authority, "Gentlemen, please escort Mx. Anderson here back to their cell."

I turn and watch as one of the massive men, the one who's not Raphael, beckons me out of the room. Raphael takes up position behind me as I step forward.

Gods I hope I'm not making a huge mistake, I think as I cast one last glance back at the contract sitting on the table.

Just before the door closes, I swear I see the stack of a hundred pages flicker, replaced for an instant by a single piece of parchment paper on the desk. I can't make out what it says before

the illusion of the stack of papers is back and I'm roughly shoved forward by good old Raph behind me.

I stay quiet on the way back down the hallway to my cell. I'm thinking furiously. Desperately trying to figure out a way to get myself free of these goons, but all too soon we're stopping at my cell door and I'm being roughly shoved back into it.

Damnit, I think as the door slams closed behind me, how the hell am I going to get out of here?

End of

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