

Cassia  
by Megan Lane

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## Table of Contents

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

## Prologue

He came, just as she had predicted. When he is died, there would be only one left to go. She smiled at the thought. They had appointed three of their highest level of magic to kill her. And, they were pathetic. She had already taken care of the first one. He was the weakest. The second, will die soon. And the third, the betrayer, would meet his end very slowly. Already she could sense the battle outside winding down. She cupped her mouth to silence her laughter. The sounds of her enemies' cries made her want to laugh. Soon, very soon, it would be all over and she would have everything. But first things first: target number two has arrived.

He knew she was there but it was too dark to see anything clearly in the cave. The only light source was from the moon that seeped through the cracks above. Outside, a war was dwindling down and he prayed that his side was winning. But, he couldn't think about that right now. He had to concentrate on defeating her, the leader and the most powerful witch of blood magic.

Foreign sounds penetrated the stillness of the cave and he held himself still, trying not to make any sudden moves that might give his position away. He waited for his eyes to become accustomed to the darkness before viewing the area around him in search of her. Suddenly, a movement darted to his right. He forced himself not to react; to stay still and wait. Closing his eyes, he opened up all of his other senses trying to pinpoint the noise.

It was hard to identify where the noise was coming from. It was moving too fast from one place to the other to get a fix on where she was. Suddenly, the sound became chaotic and indistinguishable. He shifted slightly to his left hoping to get a better range of where she would be before dodging to the right and then sprinting away from where he was hiding as bolt of lightning struck. He cursed to himself for his mistake and quickly returned fire, but it was not quick enough. He braced himself for she was already in the air and was as about land right on top of him. Her cries of victory echoed through the cave. He could see the madness, from the blood magic, had finally taken its toll on her and hoped that he still had enough power within him to kill her.

## Chapter 1

It felt like a dream. I would tell Uncle Ned every time he asked me why I always went through the park during my *ungodly hour* shift. That was what he called my morning shifts at the 24-hour diner where I worked because I would have to get up at the crack of dawn and cross Central Park to get there. I told him, as I had said many times before, I loved to watch how the sky slowly changes from a grayish hue to a soft pastel yellow then a light blue. Wisps of clouds would appear and come alive. And, the smell of the early morning sweet-scented grasses and flowers before it was tainted by the fumes of the rush hour traffic. Ten minutes of heaven. It always seemed I was in another world. He would then say, “Be careful, Cass, there are a lot of crazy people out there.” I would then roll my eyes and kiss him on the cheek before leaving.

Sometimes he would accompany me through the park, but not these days. Though he would not admit it, I could tell by way he moved and the slowness of his breath that something was wrong. It worried me—scarred me in fact. He was the only family I had left. My dad and my mom died in a car accident when I was twelve. Since then, I had been in one foster home after another trying to blend in with the other kids or making myself as inconspicuous as possible. I was sixteen when he had appeared and gave me my life back. I remembered that day very clearly. We both were afraid and uncertain as we watched each other with suspicion and hope. He never explained or made excuses. He just asked me if I wanted to live with him until I was old enough to take care of myself. And from then on, it was just him and me.

I promised him that I would take my usual walk through the park and enjoy it for the both of us while he went to his appointment at the hospital for a checkup. He assured me that there was nothing to worry about and that there was no need for me to accompany him. But all I could think about was how scared I was of losing him. My ten minutes of heaven wasn't enough to lift my spirits.

It goes without saying that I was distracted, thinking about my uncle and how I could convince my boss to let me leave early so I could be with him at the hospital. And so, I did not hear anyone coming up behind me until I was flat on my back with all the air knocked out of me. Before I could even fathom what had just happened, the creature—and I called it that only because, from my view point on the ground, that thing did not look human—was already miles away. The creature was short, stout, and hunched over with a limp in one leg.

I sighed and sat up. As upset as I was, I really didn't want my morning to be ruined further by arguing with whomever or whatever had knocked me over. I was about to get up when something made me hesitate. I looked down and saw a necklace, with a crystal attached to it, on the ground next to me. It was clear but as I moved it around, it became slightly murky. Then several round bright lights, of different colors and sizes, started to appear and swirled around until it slowly faded away.

It was very unusual and must be worth something. I should keep it, I thought, he or it doesn't deserve it. “It is mine,” I said out loud.

Then, I shook my head in surprise. What had come over me to think such thoughts and to say such words. I was taught better than that. Sighing again, I got up and started to run after the creature. I was half a mile away, ready to give up, when I saw him—it, at a clearing. As I got closer, I realized that it was a man. A very short man. Sensing I was behind him, he whipped around, bared his sharp teeth at me and started to hiss. I was taken aback by his hostility and also his appearance. He looked like, like a troll.

“What the—Hey!” I shouted.

Before I could even blink, he grabbed the necklace from my hand. And, before I could even utter another word, he drew an invisible line in the air with the crystal. The line started to glow, then it slowly opened. It was amazing. On the other side was a forest with a path that led out to the distance. It

didn't look anything like this section of the park. The troll stepped into the forest and started to run. I was stupefied, but only for a second, before I got angry. First he knocked me down, then not even a thank you for returning his necklace, he ran off again. I was definitely not going to put up with that.

“Hey!” I shouted at his retreating form.

I hesitated only for a second before I stepped into the opening. Then I turned to see it slowly closing behind me. The park, with its manicured lawn and agriculturally designed flower beds, bushes and trees that I was familiar with, disappeared until what was left was an unfamiliar overgrown and untouched forest. I turned around to find that the man was gone. For such a small person, he could run really fast. I sighed again and ran after him. The road went for miles with no end in sight and I was beginning to tire.

“I should just keep the damn thing,” I mumbled to myself. “He definitely doesn't deserve it. It's mine anyway.”

I stopped then and wondered what was wrong with me. The necklace was his, not mine. After a half mile, I regretted following him and was about to turn around to find my way back when I heard a scream. I ran to where the sound was coming from. The scream was getting louder and I could hear the agony and fear in his voice. As I turned the corner, I halted. A few feet from me were two humongous beasts. I was too far away to see any details, but by their general height and shape, they reminded me of ogres. One of them was holding the man, by the neck, up in the air.

I couldn't make out what they were saying, but it didn't look like they were greeting a friend. My brain was screaming for me to move, to hide, but I was paralyzed. My eyes wide open as I watched, in a daze and horror, as one of those monsters pulled on the man's head until it came apart from his body. There was no sound of blood-curdling screams of agony, just a spasm of his body before he went limp. They've killed him. He was dead. A small sound came from the back of my throat and I was about to scream when someone covered my mouth and pulled me into the bushes. A sensation of being safe and calm came over me even though the image of the dead man lingered in my mind.

“Stay still and keep quiet—they are coming this way,” A voice whispered into my ear.

I closed my eyes praying that we wouldn't be found. It felt like an eternity kneeling in front of this person who saved my life. I had no doubt that if he hadn't covered my mouth to prevent me from screaming and pushed me down to hid me with him, those monsters would have killed me too. A twig snapped. My eyes widened and I forced myself not to scream in fear. He tightened his grip on me. Suddenly up in the sky, a high-pitched noise sounded.

“Run!” He yelled, unconcerned that he gave our location away.

Before I could even react, he was off the ground and running, pulling me with him. It was a weird sensation, running with him. The trees blurred and it felt like we were flying. I couldn't remember ever running this fast before. And every time I felt myself tiring, there was a small burst of energy coming from his hand that was holding onto mine and spread throughout my body.

I could hear the rustle of leaves, branches, and high-pitch squeals behind us. My heart pounded and I forced myself to keep going, to run. They were gaining on us and it was only a matter of time before they caught us and killed us. The sound of a whistle shrieked through the sky. My savior stopped and pulled me behind him, as he turned around to face the direction we had just come from. We stood listening into the stillness of the forest; to the disturbingly quiet atmosphere that fell before us. And, we waited. We waited what seemed like hours before we heard the sounds of movement coming towards us from every direction. I grabbed a fist full of his shirt, plastered my body to his back and shut my eyes really tight. When it was all quiet again, I slowly opened my eyes. Then it widened, not in fear, but in surprise. There were a lot of them surrounding us and they were astonishing.

They reminded me of those mythical creatures, Elves, that I read about when I was little. All that was missing, were those pointy ears. They had light tanned faces, almond-shaped eyes with colors of either, golden brown, pale blue or green. They had long lean bodies, some more muscular than others but all were tall. I felt very small compared to them, but then I was only five-foot-three not even close

to average height. The colors of the clothing on most of them were green with blends of brown and tan mixed in, almost like a camouflage outfit, but not in any army style that I knew of. Others wore light colors, mostly earth tones. And a few wore outrageously colorful clothing. Their style of clothes was a blend of old-fashioned looks with a few new modern twists to it.

A few wore their hair long, some in an elaborate fashion and some in simple brads, while others wore their hair short, down to their shoulders. All the ones wearing camouflage clothing had hair colors of dark brown to black with varying shades of green or tan for highlights. The hair colors on the others were either very light blonde, dark blue, brown, or jet black, with a hint of purple highlights, or white. As crazy as it sounds, I must have stepped into another world, another universe since it was impossible that such beautiful and elaborated people could exist in ours. And I wondered, who or what they were.

I had turned a full circle, taking my time admiring each one of them, when I came face to face with my savior. He was just as beautiful as the rest of them. He had long black hair with streaks of green and brown mixed in. His eyes were blue like the ocean. It reminded me of the one by the beach that my parents and I went to one summer years ago when I was only a child. I don't remember the name of that place, but I do remember the roaring of waves and the color of the ocean. I stared at him, entranced by those eyes. Someone nudged him on the shoulder and he turned his head slightly but kept his eyes to mine. The person nudged him again and another called out to him. Reluctantly, he turned and walked over to the man who stood a few feet away from us. I watched them, curious about the man that my savior was talking to. He had an air of command about him by the way he moved and the manner in which he spoke with the others. Even though, I couldn't hear what they were saying, I could tell that they were acting out his orders. He must be the leader of this group.

I was slowly becoming aware of being watched and I looked to see their prying eyes boring down on me. I started to fidget, uncomfortable by their assessing eyes. It was a relief when he came back with the leader following close behind him. Suddenly, all of them converged around the three of us. I moved closer to my savior unsure of what was happening. He took my hand and a sense of calmness spread all over my body. The leader pointed his index finger into the air and drew a line. Like before, there was a glow and then an opening started to form; another scene appeared. It looked like a campground and I could see people moving about. One by one they entered the place. I didn't want to go. I had made the mistake of following the troll here and I wasn't going to do it again. Who knew what it would lead me to. My savior took my hand again when I took a step back. A sense of calmness spread through me again.

“Are you doing this?” I asked, meaning the sensation of calm that was spreading through me.

“We must go, the elders are expecting you.” He said, avoiding my question.

I took another stepped back, confused and scared by what he had said. “Expecting me? How did you guys know I will be here? I didn't even know I was going to be here.”

He tightened his grip and I could feel myself calming again.

“Stop that!” I demanded, “I don't need you to make me feel safe when I know I'm not.”

He let go and the sensation stopped. “I am sorry. I was only trying to help.”

“Then take me back to the park.”

“I am sorry I cannot do that.”

“Fine, then I'll find my way home.”

“Please, you must trust me. We must leave, the moricks will be coming soon. They know about you now.”

“Who are the moricks and how do they know me?”

“The moricks are those creatures that were chasing us before. Others like them will be coming shortly. You must trust me. No harm will come to you when you are with us.”

“I don't know who you or your friends are. Why should I trust you?”

“My name is Von. I was sent, along with the others to protect you. Please, the elders will tell you more. We must go.”

There was a sound of a horns blasting in the distance, not far from where we were.

“They are coming,” he said with urgency in his voice.

I bit my lip, not knowing what to do. I had a feeling that if I stepped through the opening, my life would never be the same. And, it scared me; the not knowing what I was walking into. Was he telling me the truth? Would I be safe with them? He and the others did save me. But was their intention honorable or did they want something from me that I may not want to give or can. I felt like I could trust him, but how did I know if it was my true feelings or if he had done one of his tricks to make me feel this way. He probably did make me trust him, to believe in him, like the way he had made me feel calm and safe with just a touch of his hand. There was a small part inside of me, at the back of my mind, that was telling me I shouldn't go with him. He and his kind would destroy me if I stepped into their camp. That, I didn't belong to them. As I listened to the creatures getting closer, there was one thing I knew for sure, if I stayed here, I was definitely going to die. I had made a choice, whither it was for the better or for the worst. I took a deep breath and stepped through.



## Chapter 2

It was different here. Instead of a thick foliage that seemed to be packed together, one on top the other, there were giant-sized trees all around us that went up further than my eyes could see. Huts of different sizes and shapes were built on these enormous tree trunks. As I looked closely, I was amazed to realize those huts grew out from the trunks themselves as if the huts were part of the trees.

Von led me to a group gathered around an unlit fire pit. The leader, who had been with us in the forest before was there. To his left were four old men and one old woman. They looked to be in their late sixties. Beside the old woman was a much older man who looked to be in his late nineties. To his left was a woman who was around my age, in her twenties. Their features and dress were similar to the group that I had seen before. The woman who was my age walked over to Von and stood beside him. Without a word or a gesture, I could tell they knew each other very well. The eldest of the group slowly walked forward and raised his hand. A small tingle sensation passed through my body.

“I have bound us to make sure that no words spoken here today will be uttered outside of this circle. If one should speak of this meeting to anyone, the rest of us will know and punishment will be set upon that person who breaks the bind,” he recited before turning to me and smiled. “Come Cassiea, you must have a lot of questions for us. I hope we will be able to answer them all. But first, let me introduce you to us. Beside me are the elders,” he gestured to the five people to his right, “Bortish Asi of the AulTar clan, Grinfir Tia of the MiuLoc clan, Huszic Rin of the KinMin clan, Balkar Sei of the MilTork clan and Molera Cyr of the TolLic clan. To my left is Shuron Letar who is the appointed leader of the clan AulTar and also an apprentice to Zoryar Letar, the Lord of the Elvain.” He then gestured to the woman next to Von. “This is Mirra Kyre my apprentice. You have already met Von Arey. And I am called Loquis Tilet the Visor. Please let us sit and we will get started.”

They all moved at once and sat circling the fire pit. They were quiet waiting for me to speak. It was disconcerting to have all eyes on me, silently waiting for me to say something. Though I had a lot of questions, I found myself muted and anchored on the spot where I stood. I became uncomfortable and self-conscious. I was never good at being in the spotlight and tended to freeze, both body and mind, like a deer caught in the headlight. Von seemed to notice and understood my hesitation. He walked over to me and held my hand, sending a small sensation of calmness and assurance through me. I smiled at him, grateful for the little jolt of courage.

When he sat back down, I cleared my throat and asked, “How do you know who I am and that I would be here?”

“We have been expecting you for a very long time now. Though we did not know when you would appear to us,” Grinfir said.

“It was not until Loquis had his vision that we knew you would be arriving here at this place,” Huszic said. “That is why we are camped here.”

I was getting more confused by the minute. “I still don't understand.”

“Please, allow me to start from the beginning and maybe then you will understand.” Loquis said. “Many centuries ago lived a very powerful witch name Keya Terie. Most of her power came from using blood magic. She killed magical beings to possess their magic and used it to make herself stronger. The more she tainted herself with the blood of others, the more erratic her mind became. You see, anyone who works with blood magic starts to crave for more of its power. It is an addictive drug. The power is ten times stronger than any magic anyone can possess but it also fades quickly and leaves the person craving for more.

“We, along with several of our allies, went to stop her. She had become too powerful for us to destroy, but when I was able to transfer her magic into a crystal, leaving her defenseless, I was able to kill her. Since her magic was saturated with the blood of others, we were unable to destroy it. We were

entrusted guard it against anyone who tries to take it and use it for their own purpose.

“A few years after Keya's death, we learned that her sister, Nara, wanted revenge for her death and her magic. To prevent it from happening, Mirtiek cast a spell on the crystal. The spell only allow the rightful owner of this magic, the master, to take it from which it resides. If others lay claim to it, the crystal will disappear and hidden in a place where magic is unknown. It will only reappear when the master, the person who is able to control it, is born once again. As you can conclude, when Nara tried to take it, it disappeared. We believed the crystal was sent to your world and for many centuries, we have been sending our scouts to find it, but was never successful. Even Nara failed to find the crystal. It was not until I had my vision, that I knew the crystal and its master will soon be reunited. And when the time was right, both the master and the crystal will find us if we waited here. You, Cassiea, is that person we have been waiting for. You are its master.”

Well, I thought, weren't they going to be disappointed when I told them that the troll had it last. “I'm sorry to say but it was the troll—the one who got killed—that you are looking for. He had the crystal. I know this because I gave it back to him when he dropped it in the park. He is the one you want.”

Loquis looked at me in amusement. “But, you have it in your hand.”

I looked down and was shocked to see that I was holding on to it the whole time. “How is this possible? I remember him taking it from me.”

“Are you sure that he had it last?”

“Yes, I'm positive. He took it from me and made a hole or a door way and we both stepped in.”

“Hmm...with your help, I have a theory I like to test out.” He took a box that was on the floor next to him. “Please, place the necklace into this box.”

I did as he asked.

“Now Cassiea, I want you to think of the necklace. Call to it as if you want to use it or wear it around your neck.”

I hesitated at first. His request was a bit strange but I figured it wouldn't hurt to humor him. Closing my eyes, I thought of the necklace and then all of a sudden I felt something heavy in my hand. I looked down and there it was. I lifted my head staring at him in amazement and confusion. They all looked at each other and nodded as if this was what they had suspected.

“We must take her to a safe place. Nara will be looking for her,” Bortish said.

“Yes, we must move quickly before it is too late,” Molera said.

“Calm yourselves. Lets not scare the girl. We still have time.” Loquis said to them before turning his attention back to me. “You must be wondering why it came back to you?”

I nodded. I was definitely interested in hearing his explanation. I suspected, after my initial shock wore off, that someone must have placed it in my hand when my eyes were closed.

“The reason why it answered to your call is because you, Cassiea, are the reincarnation of Keya. The magic in that crystal knows its master. You are the only one who can control it.”

“But, isn't this,” I said as I held out the necklace, “the reason she became evil and crazy? If I hold on to this or even use it wouldn't I become evil too?”

“No. Magic is neither evil nor good. In the simplest terms, it is a form of power that we use to mimic or change the area around us to some extent. What you have in the crystal is all the magic that Keya has collected from other magical beings during her life time. And the only way to take someone's magic from them without their consent, is by using blood magic; through the blood and pain she inflicted on her prey. It is the use of this type of magic that changed her not the magic itself. It is the killing of life that damages the soul and the mind, turning her evil. Because of how Keya acquired this magic and the way she used it to do evil things, it is imprinted with her malevolent actions. And so, if anyone who possesses and use this magic, in a short period of their life, the crystal will take hold of them and make them do terrible things. They will turn evil like her. Only you, who is the sole owner of this magic, is able to control it and change it. Because you, like Keya, is its master and can command it

to do your bidding. You can change the imprint it has to good.”

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Someone must be playing a practical joke on me or maybe this was all a dream and I was still lying in the park unconscious from being knocked to the ground by that troll. Regardless of how I came to be here, I had to leave. I needed to get back to my uncle.

“Well, thank you all for saving me. You've created quite a story. I would like to stay here and chat some more but I got to go.”

“I told you Loquis that these humans never believe in anything,” Balkar said.

“Be patient, Balkar. We have only ourselves to blame for this, or have you forgotten that over the centuries we have been collecting books, artifacts, and even lifeforms that have some magical presence in order for their existence may not be discovered by Cassiea's people.” He turned to me and said, “I know it is hard to believe our words but we are telling you the truth.”

“I'm sorry, but magic doesn't exist. And I know that you've made up that whole story about Keya. You can't possibly still be alive if it all took place centuries ago. I am not sure how I got here,” I said, meaning the whole stepping into the forest from the park, then to their campsite. “But there must be some scientific explanation for it. Could someone please tell me how I can get back to the park?”

“It is not safe for you to go back now that Nara knows of you. She will try to capture you in order to get the magic in the crystal,” Huszic said.

“I can take care of myself. If this crystal is so important, you can take it back.” I held it out to them to take. “You can protect it like you did before.”

“It will not be possible now,” Loquis said.

“Why not?”

“Because, the crystal will go only to where its master is.”

“You make it sound like it's a living thing.”

“It is alive, but not in the way you are thinking. This magic was part of Keya and it would gravitate towards her. Just as it would act out its purpose of what the owner was using it for and Keya was using her magic for evil. You are the reincarnation of Keya. This magic will gravitate towards you and will listen to you.”

“Okay, then it doesn't matter if anyone takes it, they won't have it for a vary long time since it will come back to me.”

“That is true so long as the master lives.”

I stepped back. That didn't sound so good—kind of disturbing. “So, if anyone who wants to keep this magic, all they have to do is kill me?”

“Yes, I am afraid so.”

“Well, what about the spell that was cast on it? Wouldn't it disappear if anyone tries to take it even though I'm died?”

“A spell can only last as long as the caster bids it to or until their death. Unfortunately, Mirtiek was killed when Nara discovered he had placed the spell on the crystal.”

I should be a little scared, hearing them talk about someone killing me, but strangely enough, I wasn't. They didn't look threatening. They and everything else looked like a huge production, a prank. Everyone was playing a part and I was the joke. I don't know why they would go through all this trouble, but I was done humoring them. I placed the necklace near the edge of the fire pit. As interesting as this was, I wasn't going to fall for any of their make believe. “Well this has been fun, but I really have to go. My uncle will be worried about me if I don't come home.”

“Do not worry about your uncle. He is still at the hospital. Please do not be alarmed,” Loquis quickly assured me when he saw that I was ready to bolt. “He is fine. They wanted him to stay over night for observation. He will be home by noon tomorrow.”

“How do you know that?” I said. I was upset and a bit frightened that they knew about my Uncle. “Have you been spying on me?”

“Upon our learning of your existence, we have been watching over you until it was time for you to

know of us. We were all aware of your uncle is in the hospital and placed a scout there to guard him when you came to us. We were afraid that Nara will use him to get to you.”

Wow. They were good. Scary, but good. “Well, thank you. But, you didn't need to go through all that trouble. I should go and see him before visiting hours are over,” I said as I moved to leave.

“Cassiea please wait.” Von came forward and stood next to me. “Stay. Please.”

I was about to reply when Mirra stepped next to him and placed a hand on his arm. “Von if she chooses to leave, let her. We can place several scouts to guard her.”

“She will be safer here,” he replied back. “There are more of us here to guard her,” he emphasized before turning back to me. “Please, believe us. Everything you have just heard is true. It is important for you to stay with us. Your life is in danger. You must be protected until the magic within this crystal is absorbed within you.”

“What do you mean, 'absorbed'?”

“The crystal is only a temporary vessel. If a person holds onto it long enough, the magic within it will slowly be absorbed into them. Right now you are vulnerable, not just from Nara but from anyone who wants this magic.”

“Okay, I think enough is enough. I don't want to play this game. I'm not going to believe in anything you say. Now, please, can someone take me back to the park.”

“Believe us or not Cassiea, it will not stop others from killing you or your loved ones to take the magic in the crystal.”

“Von, do not frighten her,” Shuron stepped in to say before looking my way. “Cassiea, although Von's words are true, there is no need for you to worry. We will not let anything happen to you or your uncle.”

“I am sorry, but you all can't possibly think that I would believe in all of this. Do you know how crazy all of this sounds? I am not the reincarnation of Keya. There is no magic or magic powers that is stored in a crystal. I'm not *the master* to this crystal magic thing. I am just an ordinary person who would like to go home.”

“You can believe us or not, but if you leave now you will not only put yourself in danger, but your uncle as well. Do you really want to take that chance?” Von asked.

I looked at him and then at the others. If all this was true than I definitely needed their help. But, how could any of this be possible? There was no such thing as magic. How could I believe in something that I know does not exist? This had to be a big practical joke. My train of thought was interrupted when Von took both of my hands.

“Please, trust in me, Cassiea. I do not want anything to happen to you.”

I stared up at him, those cobalt-blue eyes, so mesmerizing, and in that instant I knew I could trust him, that everything they said was true and that he would protect me. I felt like I was where I was supposed to be.

Without hesitation, I nodded. “Okay, I will stay, but only for tonight. I need to be home when my uncle gets out of the hospital.”

The elders wanted to protest but Loquis held out his hand. “Then it is settled. I hope once you get to know us better, you will believe what was said here is the truth. In the mean time, Von will show you where you will be staying.”

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Mirra waited until everyone had left, when it was only her and Loquis. She walked over to him and watched Von and Cassiea as they moved further into the distance.

“Do you think she will learn to trust us?”

“I believe she will, though it will take some time. I am afraid she will have a hard life ahead of her before she is able to accept who she is.” He sighed and started to walk. She followed beside him.

“Is something wrong?”

“I do not trust her, Loquis. I have seen her turn. We should lock her up somewhere. The magic in the crystal is too important for her to be outside where she can be easily taken or hard to capture if she has turned evil.”

“That is not the way for a visor or their apprentice to speak. You must get rid of your feelings, Mirra. We must stay neutral about all things we see. It is up to the elders to decide without our personal opinion on what to do with our visions.”

“I understand, but can we afford to place something this important in her hands? If she turned, all of us will be in danger. You know as well as I that some visions of the future are destined.”

“Yes, some are destined but you should know by now there is uncertainty to every outcome in our visions. Mirra, you know as well as I that this crystal is meant for her. We do not know what the future holds. The only thing we are able to do and be responsible for is to guide her. She alone must choose which path she will take.”

“And, you think Von can help.”

“Yes, I do. Did you not see how she glanced at him every so often? I think she feels comfortable with him and she trusts him. Right now, at this crucial time, she needs someone she can trust.”

“Even if it means he will die. You saw it, as well as I did, that he will die because of her.”

“Yes. Von also knows what will happen to him and I think he understands why now.”

“I love him, Loquis. How can I stand here and let him go?”

“I am sorry, Mirra. Do not think of me as heartless. It is the way of a visor. We cannot let our emotions get in the way. We cannot get involved. We cannot guess as to the meanings of our vision. We can only tell what we see. You must remember that if you are going to succeed me. Do not forget about how our history has proven what a heavy cost it is to us when we try to intervene in our vision. This is the only way to protect our world.”

“And, what about you Loquis? Will you be okay? I do not think I can let you go either.”

He smiled and patted her shoulder. “I have already lived longer than I should.”

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### Chapter 3

“Tell me about this place. Is it all like this?” I waved my hand at our surroundings. Everywhere I saw was filled with plant life. There was no artificial structures or buildings. “Do you have buildings and streets like our cities? Do you have houses like ours or do you have huts in the trees like those?” I said, as I pointed to one that was in front of us. “How do you all live?”

Von smiled. “Most of our world is filled with plant life. We do have buildings, but not like your cities. The buildings or corts, as we like to call them, are grown and shaped to our preference. Some of us choose to live in trees and others on the ground.”

“What do you mean by grown?”

He led me to an area of greenery. He put out his hand and concentrated. The plant in front of us began to grow. It twisted and turned until the shape of a miniature hut, similar to the ones on the trees above us, was created. My eyes widened with amazement.

“How did you do that?”

“Magic.”

I lightly touched the form and noticed how sturdy and solid it felt.

“So you use the things around you to make your homes. Like one would gather twigs, branches, logs, and leaves to build a shelter.”

“In a way, yes. We have seen it done before by your people. But when we built, we do not cut and collect the materials,” he hesitated a little, not knowing how to explain, “we just encourage the plants to grow in a way we want it to.”

To try to explain a little bit better, he held out his hand and concentrated again. The plants moved again until it was back to its normal form.

“Amazing! Does everyone here is able to do this?”

He was quiet for a couple of minutes. I thought that he didn't hear me until he said, “Some more than others.”

“What do you mean?”

He looked away, not meeting my eyes. We started to walk before he answered. “What I did before, any child can do. Building an actual cort requires a higher level of magic.”

“Level of magic? What does that mean?” I asked.

“Each of us has different level of magic and there are five levels. Five being the most powerful. Level one and five are the rarest.”

“What level are you?”

He hesitated a little. “I'm a one.” Before I could ask more questions, he said, “This is where you will be staying.”

I looked up. The hut or cort, as they called them, wasn't as high up on the tree as I thought it would be, but as I looked even further, I saw more corts. There were several makeshift stairs going around the trunk to each one of them. We climbed to the second landing and went in. The interior space was bigger than what it appeared to be from the outside. There was a bed at a corner. A table and a chair and a cabinet at the other side. Though it was a very simple setup, it had a lived-in feeling and looked very comfortable.

“There are some clothes in that chest next to the bed that you may use. The cabinet has other supplies that you might need.”

“Thank you.”

He smiled. “You are welcome. I hope you will stay here longer than a day, Cassiea. This place may not be what you are used to. We live simply here. I hope that in time, it will grow on you.”

“Thank you. This is fine with me. And please, I prefer you call me Cass.”

He nodded and left. When he was gone, I took out my cell phone and prayed that it would work here and was relieved when I saw I had full bars. I called the hospital and got through to my uncle's room. He assured me that everything was fine and he would see me tomorrow. I wasn't tired at all and decided to have a look around at their campsite. Hopefully no one would mind.

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"I just saw her with Motair asking a lot of questions about what he does here. She is a very curious person. I heard she had already introduced herself to several others. They all seemed to like her." Shuron said as he and Von watched Cassiea as she talked to a scout before she moved on to several others near her.

"I am glad."

They were quiet for a while as they stood several feet above the ground. They were on a platform created by several branches that intertwined over and under each other. It was used as an observation deck to look out for any signs of trouble that might come their way.

"It was not wise of you to entrance her into agreeing to stay here with us."

"I was hoping no one noticed."

"You need not worry. No one noticed except me. But I must warn you, it will be harder for her to trust us if she ever found out what you did."

"I cannot let her go, Shuron. She is safer here."

"I believe she will be safer this us also." He said and hesitated for a moment before continuing. "Are you sure you want to do this knowing what you know? I can take over protecting her."

"No, I am responsible for her."

"You are going to risk your life for her?"

"It is strange, but from the moment I met her, I knew she was meant for me. I have to protect her even if it will cost me my life. She is well worth it."

"Mirra will not like this, Von. You know how much she cares about you."

"Shuron, you know I never gave her any encouragement."

"I know. But one's heart cannot be changed with simple words."

Von smiled and looked at him. "Yes, I do know and that is why I will not change my mind."

He smiled back at him. "I understand. I will help in any way that I can."

"Thank you." He said before turning back to watch Cass. "Will you look after her when I am gone?"

"We are blood brothers, are we not? I will treat her like a sister. You have my promise. Do not worry and try not to think about the future. As a visor would say, a vision only gives us a glimpse of the future. It does not tell us the whole tale. All this worrying about your death may be for nothing."

Von was relieved that someone would be there for Cass. He hoped Loquis and Mirra were wrong because now that he had found her, he did not want to let her go.

"I sense there is something else troubling you."

"It is nothing. I better go. I would like to escort her to the evening meal."

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"Ah...Cassiea, I see that you are adjusting well," Loquis said as he came up to me.

"Hello, Loquis. Please, call me Cass. And yes, I am. Every-one is very friendly here. I think they are kind of weary of me asking so many questions."

He chuckled. "You need not worry. They know that you are new to our world."

I smiled at him and said, "Could I ask you something? It's about the conversation we had before with the elders." He nodded for me to go on. "Von said that I must wait until all of the magic is absorbed into me before I am safe. Do you know how long it will take?"

"None of us knows this. That memory is lost to us. Something like this has only been done once

centuries ago, before my time.”

“Then how do you know that I will be able to absorb this magic at all?”

“When we were trying to find a way to destroy Keya, some of our historians looked through our old books that date back to our beginnings. We found a spell that can transfer a person's magic into an object and then, in time it will slowly be absorbed back into that person again.”

“Why would someone want to do this?”

“It was a form of punishment but only used for someone who has committed a heinous crime. It was forbidden to use unless all possibilities were exhausted. I believe Keya was the second person to have this done to.”

“Why was it forbidden to use?”

“Transferring someones power into an object without their consent is almost the same as stealing someones magic. It is very close to blood magic. The only differences are that there is no blood spilled to perform this spell. And the sacrifice is to the one who administers the punishment.”

“What kind of sacrifice?”

“It is hard to explain. I will use myself as an example. As you know, I was the one who transferred Keya's power into the crystal. Over the years, her power had grown exponentially. Each of us has a different level of power or magic. To begin with, her magic was a level one. When she started to steal magic from other living beings, her level increased.”

“Von had told me about the level of magic, but he said the highest was a five and that was rare to have.”

“Yes, it is. We are all born with different levels of magic, five and one being the rarest. Above level five comes from blood magic. That was why none of us was able to defeat her unless we used this spell. Though it only requires one person to perform it, there were three of us who was given the responsibility. I and two others who, at that time, were the only ones with a level five and young enough to live through the spell. Because Keya's magic was so powerful, the spell took more than half of my life span. If she was less powerful, I would probably lose only one year of my life span.”

“What do you mean, more than half of your life span?”

“Let us say you will live until you are ninety years old. When you live half of your life span, you will only live until you are forty-five years old.”

I frowned at him. “But, didn't you say you were the one who transferred Keya's power to the crystal?” When he nodded, I went on. “If it took place centuries ago, shouldn't you be died by now? But you are here living a full life.”

“Do not let my appearance fool you. I am actually thirty-five years old in human years. We Elvainians live a much longer life than humans.”

“Do not look so sad. I have no regrets. I did what had to be done. There is another reason why we do not use this spell. It is because after a while the power will return to the person and only in death will it stay in the object that it was transferred into. The object itself creates a problem also since any life form who acquires it can use it but not control it; only the master can.”

“And you believe I am this magic's master because it came to me when I called it?”

He nodded and we started to walk again.

“There is one thing I don't understand. When you said Keya stole other peoples magic. You said that it came from blood magic.”

“Yes, that is true.”

“You also said that taking someone's magic does not last long and the person will crave for more.”

“Yes.”

“My problem is, if it doesn't last long, how did she held on to this magic?”

“You are right in regards to its limitations. We are at a loss as to why or how she was able to retain all of her acquired magic for so long. We also have no answer to why, after she has gone, it is still in the crystal.”



We continued to walk, both lost in our own thoughts. A couple of minutes passed before I asked another question. "Is there a way to quickly absorb the magic? Like, breaking the crystal since it is what's holding the magic?"

"There might be a way but I advise against it since we do not know much about the spell. The book does not go into great details. Besides, this crystal is different from others. It will not be easy to break. Do not rush this, Cassiea. Things tend to go wrong when one tries to rush things along."

"Cass; please call me Cass. If it is true, then until this power is in me I will always be in danger. Whoever is close to me will be in danger."

"We will protect you. You have my promise."

"Yes, but I prefer to live my life. All of you can't waste your time following me around and I don't always want to look over my shoulder for constant threats. And I do not want to stay here. As much as I love your world, I have a life of my own that I want to keep and I have my uncle to take care of."

"Maybe you should learn how to use your magic."

"What?"

"I wanted to wait until you have accepted your fate, but now I believe you should understand how to use and control your magic. Maybe then you will understand and accept the responsibility."

I was going to ask him to explain when Von joined us.

"I am glad you are here, Von. Cassiea and I have been talking and it has come to my attention that it would be beneficial for her to learn the use of her magic sooner than what we originally had in mind. I believe you will be the right person to teach her. Please, set aside some time for this. If you need to switch or hold off a few of your responsibilities, then do not hesitate to let Shuron know." He then turned to me and said, "I must go and let the elders know about your training."

I was about to go after him when Von put a hand on my shoulder. "The evening meal has started; we better go."

"I'm sorry to bother you with training me. I was kind of surprised myself. We were just talking and —" I stopped when he smiled and held my hand.

"Cass, there is no need to apologize. I am use to Loquis' ways. He has his reasons for what he does. I will be happy to help. We will start tomorrow morning. I think the sooner the better."

"But, I have to get back home to my uncle."

"That is fine. We can train there."

"Thank you. My uncle, he is all I have. I don't know what I'd do if I lost him."

"I understand. We better go. You must be hungry."

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"She seems to be enjoying herself."

Von glanced over to see Loquis sitting down next to him. They both sat quietly watching Cass for a couple of minutes before Loquis broke the silence.

"Shuron has confided in me that there is something bothering you. Would you like to talk about it?"

After a brief hesitation, he said, "Do you think I am the right person to protect her? I know you had your vision, but are you sure it was me?"

"You know as well as I that visions are not always clear. What I am certain of is she will need you to keep her safe. You are the one who will save her. But by doing so, your life will be forfeited. Why do you question this? You have always trusted my words."

"How can I possibly protect her when my magic is so weak, Loquis? It should be someone whose magic is a level five."

"Why do you doubt yourself Von? I seem to recall a little boy who was teased and bullied constantly by another boy because his magic was a level one. Instead of cowering, he was brave enough to do something about it. He found a spell that bound the bully's magic and faced him using

only his fists. Tell me, Von, who do you think won that fight? The bully or the boy?"

He smiled at the memory. "The boy."

"Yes, you won. You, who have a level one magic, found a way to push back. Although, I do not approve of your method in solving that matter, you had put him onto your level. You reminded him that even with his great magic, he is still as vulnerable as anyone else and can be easily taken down. I believe that the bully learned his lesson and never bothered you again. I understand the two of you are blood brothers since that day."

When Loquis saw him nodding, he went on. "We live in a world of magic for far too long. Using it on a daily basis makes it hard for us to think of using anything else. And maybe, that is where the problem lies. Nara never ventured out of this world. She will use methods that are based on magic. You who have very little of it, is forced to use other means to get the same result and that maybe the reason why you are better suited for this mission. Your path lies on this road because you will bring in something that is different, which will save her, while others will use methods that Nara will have taken into account. Let us not forget that you were the one who discovered the binding spell. Without it, we would not have defeated Keya. There is a reason why your magic is a level one. It is so you could find a way to help us defeat Keya. And, it will help save Cassiea."

"I would not have known about spell casting if you did not mentioned it to me."

"And, you would not have been interested in spell casting if you were not a level one and had a bully. All things happens for a reason."

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## Chapter 4

The evening meal was more like a party than anything else, very festive and boisterous. Everyone talked and laughed all at once. Some played music, some sang, and others danced. It seemed, when they were not working, they loved to gather and celebrate. I had a wonderful time talking to and meeting all of them. They were kind and friendly, but very secretive and protective of their world. When I tried to question further about who they were and their society, they became evasive. From what little I could gather, they had a strong sense of responsibility to their people and others that lived here. When I asked if there were other races that resides here beside them, they smiled and said that if there were any, they would introduce themselves to me eventually. They lavished themselves with fine, intricately designed clothing. And adorned themselves with ornaments on their hair and body. Each item was unique, colorful, radiant and ornate. I saw a couple of scouts who came back to the campsite, quickly went to their cort and changed into what I could only describe as their “decorative wear.”

They had a Lord who was responsible for all of the Elvainians and who happened to be Shuron’s father. There was a group of elders, in which five of them represented each clan. And, my guess was that the five that I had meet earlier, were them. The other elders were like our historians, authors, and reporters. There were three visors and each had one or two apprentices. They were called visors because they had the gift to see visions. Each clan had a leader who was in charge of them, and Shuron was the leader of their clan, the AulTar. And the rest were healers and scouts—mostly scouts. The healers were like our doctors and nurses and they too had apprentices. The scout’s responsibilities were different depending on their gifts, strengths and magic level. They were the most complicated to describe. In general, they did whatever the other groups didn’t do. For example, some were hunters or guards and some were like our police and detectives. Most were assistants who helped anyone that was in need of their service.

They had a home where all the clans lived together. Since each clan was responsible for a certain area of their world, they were often away at their campsite for weeks or months. What they did while they were away from home was never revealed to me. All of them, with the exception of the leader and elder, who were assigned to a clan, could move from one clan’s campsite to the other depending on where he or she was needed. It was fascinating to learn as much as I did about them and I was sorry that I had to leave the next day. I had only scratched the surface of who they were and what their society was like.

“Is the evening meal always like this?” I asked when Von was taking me back to my cort.

“Sometimes it is calmer and other times it is livelier than this. I hope you enjoyed yourself.”

“Yes, I had a wonderful time. It’s beautiful here. It is hard to believe that something like this exists.”

“Does that mean you believe us now?”

“I am getting there.”

“Good. I am glad. I hoped that you would like it here.”

“I do. It reminds me of camping. My uncle and I would go a couple of times a year. It is more fun than going on an excavation.”

“Excavation?”

“I am minoring in archaeology and I went on a dig once as part of a class assignment.”

“Is that what your responsibility is, to go on excavations?”

“No, I am just minoring in archaeology. My major is anthropology. What do you do around here?”

“I am a scout. I protect our campsite. Sometimes I go lend a hand if anyone needs help while we are around this area.”

“Does your clan move around a lot?”

“We have a place that we call home, but yes we do move around when we are needed.”

“And, you are here because of me.”

“Yes.”

“I wish I wasn't here.”

“I am glad you are. If you were not, I would never have met you.”

I smiled up at him. “Well, meeting you is the only bright side. But, why couldn't it be under a different circumstance? I do't want this.” Meaning the magic that I was responsible for. “If I could, I would give it all up,” I said as I looked at the crystal.

“Cass, I know you did not choose this. Sometimes life brings you something unexpected. You may not like it, but fate is blind. It is we who determines if it will be good or bad. It is all about perception.” He watched as I held up the crystal. “This power you have may be a gift or a curse. You are the only one who is able choose which one it will be.”

“You make it sound so simple.”

“I was not trying to. I know it is hard to comprehend, let alone try to will yourself into accept something you do not want.”

“What would you do if you were me?”

“Probably the same thing.” He smiled. “But, I have to remember that I am not alone in this world. Whatever I choose, it will affect others. It would be selfish of me if I only thought of what I want.”

I sighed. “This is very complicated. I am scared Von. I am really scared.”

“I know. Just remember, I will be here to protect you.”

I smiled. “My very own Lancelot.” I took a big breath and let it out slowly. “I have a lot to think about. I still don't know if all this is real or some kind of a joke.”

“Maybe once you have accepted that this is real, it will be easier to accept the responsibility of your magic.”

“I guess...”

I was turning to go when he took hold of my hand. “I promise you as long as I am around, I will be here to help you. You will not go through this alone.”

“Thank you,” I said before leaning over and kissing him on the lips. I was shocked. I didn't know what came over me. He stopped me when I was about to move away. Slowly, he bent down, giving me enough time to pull away, if I wanted to, and touched his lips to mine. When I opened my mouth slightly, Von deepen the kiss. My hands slowly slid up to his chest then wrapped around his neck. He made a sound as he moved me closer to him.

It felt good to be in his arms, to be kissed. The warmth of his body and the strength that radiated from him, made me feel safe and at peace. It would be nice, I thought, to stay with him like this, in his arms. It had been a long time since I let someone this close to me and I relished this moment in his arms. Then, an image of Mirra appeared in my mind. Crap! I quickly pulled away from him.

“I am sorry. I didn't mean to kiss you. It was just—”

“No apologies, Cass. I am glad,” he said and smiled at me. “I have been wanting to kiss you since we met this morning.” Then he frowned at me with uncertainty. “Do you regret it?”

“What about Mirra?”

He looked confused for a moment then smiled. “She is like a sister to me. We have known each other since we were kids.”

“Well, in that case, I don't regret it.”

He cupped my face with his hand and just looked at me. “You do not know how relieved that makes me feel.” He kissed me again, this time lightly on the lips, then gathered me into his arms. After a while, he reluctantly let go. “I will let you rest.”

I could not stop myself from grinning as I watched him leave. Some believe in love at first sight. I didn't. At least I thought I didn't. But as I watched him walk away, he made a believer out of me. How in such a short time could this happen? I could probably list thousands of reasons to dispute a such

notion, but I didn't want to. I didn't want to think logically or take it slow. I wanted to dive in and enjoy the moment. The sun was just starting to set, the day had not ended yet and I had found love. Call me crazy. Crazy to want to be with a man that I had only known for just one day.

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“Something on your mind, Mirra?”

“I thought you were on duty tonight.”

“I traded with Eurydice. Loquis wants me close by while our guest is here.”

She frowned when he mentioned the woman.

“You do not like her very much, do you?”

“How can you knowing what will happen to Von?”

He placed a hand on her shoulder. “I am worried about him too Mirra, but he has accepted his fate. We should support him on this. He needs us.”

“I wish we have never met her. I lost him Shuron. The moment he saw her, I lost him. I tried so hard, but it was never enough.”

He gathered her into his arms in comfort, “I am sorry.”

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It was dark. I was standing at the doorway looking into a room. The dim ceiling light from the hallway gave a faint illumination of the dark interior of the room. The only thing I could make out was a silhouette of a person lying on a bed. For some reason, I knew who it was and where I was. This was the hospital and on the bed sleeping was my uncle.

“Uncle Ned?” I called out softly.

I called to him again, this time a little louder, and got no answer, just silence. I squinted when I saw movement.

“Uncle Ned, are you awake?”

I heard a small flutter. Then a sharp squeak before another movement caught my eyes. Something was wrong, terribly wrong. A chill ran down my spine and I could sense someone else was here with us.

“Who's there?” I demanded when I saw a movement at the corner. My breath caught. A set of glowing red eyes appeared near the bed. Then several more eyes lighted up in the darkness. It was not human. One jumped onto the bed.

“No!” I shouted to the figure looming over my uncle. “Get away from him.” I tried to move, but I couldn't. I was frozen in place as I screamed for it to get away from my uncle.

“Leave him alone! Don't you dare hurt him! Don't!”

It lunged forward at me and I woke up screaming and flailing my arms to get away from the attacker.

“Cassiea, it is me, Von!”

“Get away from me!” I shouted and at the same time, a burst of energy came through my hands sending a shock wave that knocked Von to the other side of the room. He mumbled something before the room was filled with light.

“Von!” I screamed and scrambled out of bed to go to him.

He groaned and tried to stand.

“I am sorry. Here, let me help you.” I put his arm around my shoulder and helped him walk to the bed. Gently, I laid him down.

“I am so sorry. I don't know what happened. How did...was it me? I...” I didn't know what to say to the guy who saved me and I almost killed him.

“Cass.” He held my hand and waited until I looked at him. “It is okay. I am okay.” He slowly sat up. “Are you all right? I heard you screaming.”

I took two long breaths trying to settle my nerves. Then I started to shake all over. He hugged me close and tried to calm me as best he could.

“What happened, Von? Did I do—How did I...?”

“It was your magic. Somehow, subconsciously, you were able to use it when you felt threatened.”

The magic? Then everything they said was real, I thought. How could that be possible? “Is this going to happen often when I am in danger? What about other times when I am not in danger? Am I going to send someone flying across the room even though they did nothing to me?”

“Do not worry, Cass. All you need is training. Once you learn how to use your magic, this will not happen again.”

I nodded as I leaned against him. It felt good wrapped in his arms. He had to be in pain, but I didn't want to move away from him.

He kissed the top of my head and said, “Did you have a nightmare?”

I nodded. “I was at the hospital, by the doorway of my uncle's room. There was something wrong, I could feel it. Something was moving in the darkness. Whatever the thing was, I just knew it wanted to hurt him. I tried to move, but I couldn't. I was frozen in place and as hard as I tried, I couldn't move. I started to yell and scream, but—” I could not go on.

“It is all right. It was only a dream. It is over now.”

Yes, it was only a dream though I could not help but wonder if my uncle was really okay. There was a feeling of urgency inside me. I had to go to him. If I didn't, something terrible would happen.

“I have to go, Von. I have to see my uncle to make sure he is all right.”

“Cass, everything is fine. If anything happens to him, we will know. We have people watching over him.”

“Please, please help me. I shouldn't have stayed here.” I got up and started pacing. I couldn't stay still anymore. Somehow, I had to find a way to get back to my world.

He got up and held on to my arms to stop me from moving. He waited until I looked up at him before saying, “I will help, but I need a few things from my room and I need to let Shuron know where we are going.”

I nodded.

“I don't think this is a good idea,” Shuron said when we told him about what we were going to do. I tilted my head up slightly and stared up at him in defiance. “I am going no matter what.”

“I can see that,” he said to me before turning to Von. “You agree with her?”

“No, but she is determined to go. I do not think we have a choice. I was hoping you can join us.”

“I am sorry I cannot; at least not right away. Larsid has not returned from his scouting. Our lord wants me to personally look into it, but I will join you as soon as I can.”

Von placed a hand on his shoulder. “Be careful, Shuron, this is not the first one of our people to go missing.”

“I will say the same to you brother.”

## Chapter 5

It was good to be back. Though it had only been a day, it felt like months since I had stepped foot on familiar ground. I glanced at Von and noticed he seemed different. He seemed uncomfortable and his posture was stiff and tense, the opposite of how he was in his world. And I wondered if it was because we were here, so far away from his world or because of the possible danger we might encounter.

“I am sorry if coming here is making you nervous. I know it is safer for me to stay in your world, but...”

He turned to me and gave me a reassuring smile. “I am fine. I am just not used to this place.”

“Is this your first time here?”

“I have been here before and also lived here for about a year when I was young, but I am afraid I never got used to your world.”

“Speaking of yours and my world. Where is yours, exactly? I mean, is your world in another country like Switzerland or something? Are we even on the same planet?”

He chuckled. “No, it is nothing like that. Many centuries ago, before my father's or even his father's time, your race and mine lived together peacefully until one day, a conflict arose. A war ensued. It lasted for years and when it was finally over, both sides were very bitter and angry. Our king at that time decided it was for the best if we separated ourselves from yours until both sides were ready to live peacefully together once again. He created a pocket of our world from yours.”

“A pocket?”

“Let us say the earth was one long flat line. Somewhere in the middle of that line, we took two points and folded it until the two points meet. Your world lives within that line, never knowing that there was a folded piece of that line missing. And, we live in that folded piece.”

“So, we are both on Earth and your people somehow hid a piece of the earth to live in.”

“Yes, though it is more complicated than what I just explained.”

“It must take a lot of magic to pull that off. How are you keeping your world hidden?”

“We have these opals that we have placed around our world to keep us from being discovered.”

“Opals?”

“The simple way to describe them is stored magic.”

“Like a battery? Wait—it is more complicated than that.”

He smiled. “Yes, when you start working with magic, it will help to clarify things.”

When we got to the hospital, I found it strange that no one stopped us. It was midnight, way past visiting hours, and no one questioned us as to why we were here.

“Are you doing this?” I whispered to him.

“Doing what?” he whispered back.

“We are walking in this hospital without anyone stopping us. Visiting hours ended hours ago,” I said then looked around before adding, “no-body is even looking in our direction. It is as if we are invisible.”

“I placed a small spell on us to prevent them from seeing us. They also can not hear us.”

“Really,” I whispered then cleared my throat and started talking normally. “That is amazing; you should teach me this spell.”

“You do not need it.”

“Why not?”

“You have your magic.”

Before I could ask him what he meant by that, we were at my uncle's door. I was about to open it when he stopped me.

“What's wrong?”

“There should be guards posted at his door.”

He pushed me behind him and whispered something under his breath that I couldn't hear and placed his palm on the door. “I do not feel anything magical. Stay by the door just in case. I will call you when it is safe.”

He pulled out a small crystal, about palm size, and whispered again. Slowly the crystal began to glow. Cautiously, he opened the door. When nothing happened he went in. Using the glow of the crystal to light his way, we were able to see my uncle on the bed. Von made a quick tour around the room and the bathroom. When all was clear, he motioned me in. I went straight to the bedside and held my uncle's hand. Slowly he woke by my touch.

“Cass what are you doing here? Shouldn't you be home?”

“I want to see you, Uncle Ned, to make sure that you are all right.”

“I'm perfectly fine as I told you over the phone. There is nothing for you to worry about.” He then noticed that there was someone else in the room. “Who is this person with you?”

I turned to see Von looking around the room with his nose up in the air as if sniffing for something. He seemed tense and ready for action.

“Von is everything all right?”

“Something is wrong,” he said without taking his attention away from what he was doing. “There should be scouts outside guarding and a protection spell in the room.”

“Relax, no one is here except us.”

“Cass, what is he talking about?” My uncle asked, looking very confused at the strange conversation we were having.

“It's nothing, Uncle Ned. You should—” I stopped mid-sentence when I felt a chill running down my spine and the hairs at the back of my neck stood on ends. A small high-pitched sound was coming from the door.

“What's going on?” Uncle Ned asked. There was concern in his voice as he looked from me to Von.

“I will tell you later. Right now, we need to leave,” I said urgently and helped him off the bed. All at once, the window next to the bed shattered and the door burst open as several creatures came through. I screamed then moved my uncle and myself back until we bumped into Von. We were back to back facing the creatures on all sides. I was shocked to realize that these things were from my dream. They had shiny green coating on their bodies and their eyes glowed red in the dim light. Their pointy ears moved at every sound made in the room. They were hunched over and their arms and legs were thin with claws as hands. Their face resembled a bat and their bodies looked like two round balls, one on top of the other, with thin legs and arms protruding out.

“Urichs.”

“What!”

“They are Urichs. Be careful; their claws are poisonous. You can die from just one small scratch.”

“How are we going to get out of here?”

“I have an idea, but it will only last for a few seconds. You and your uncle have to be ready to move. Head for the door and run as fast as you can. No matter what happens, do not stop for anything. Are you ready?”

“Yes.”

“Cover your ears now.”

There was a loud vibrating sound like a tuning fork striking and the sound it made was bouncing all over the walls. The creatures screeched even louder and pulled back, trying to get away from the sound. Von pushed us to the door to get us moving and we ran down the hallway to the stairwell. We went down the first flight of stairs before we heard the high-pitched noises from above us.

“We need to get out of the stairs now,” he yelled over the noise.



But it was too late. One of the urichs jumped from above and was about to land on top of me when Uncle Ned pushed me away. The creature clawed at his chest before Von could kill it and move us down the stairs. No sooner did we get to the second flight of stairs, when several of the urichs jumped from above and landed right in front of us. We were cornered. Quickly, Von took out his crystal again and whispered under his breath. A burst of flame shot out from the crystal. He moved it from side to side as I watched the creatures jump back and cowered in fear. He blew on the flame and it shot forward, consuming the urichs that dared to get too close. Von kept blowing on the flame at them until we were halfway down the third flight of stairs. He then stopped, raised his arms while holding the crystal with both hands, and said a few quick words that I couldn't understand. Within seconds, the flame shot up and covered the entire space above us, making a blanket of fire that blocked the urichs from attacking us further. He moved us out of the stairwell and into the hallway. Everything was quiet, empty, and strangely calm considering what we had just stepped out from.

“I do not know how long the spell will last. We have to get out of here. We will—”

“Uncle Ned!” I screamed. “Please don't,” I begged. “Get up. You have to get up,” I said as I shook him. “We have to go.”

Von was by my side. He touched the claw marks made by the urichs on my uncle's chest. He then cursed under his breath, and I knew then that there was nothing he could do.

Cass, I am sorry,” he said softly to me.

I started to cry.

“We have to go.” He said a few seconds later.

“No!”

“Cass, I—”

“I'm not going to leave him here.”

“We have to.”

“He's all I have,” I said before pulling away and lay my head on my uncle's chest hoping to hear a faint beat of his heart, hoping to feel the rise and fall of his chest. “Come back to me,” I prayed. But no matter how hard I wished, hoped, and begged he did not move. He was so still, so lifeless. How could that possibly be? It couldn't be him, not my uncle.

He turned me around and shook me lightly as if that would help clear me of my grief. “Cess, we must go.” He said to me urgently.

“I don't want to.”

He put both hands on my cheeks and tilted my head up to look at him. “You have me, Cassiea. You are not alone. You have me by your side.” He leaned down and kissed me before wrapping me in his arms. “We have to go.”

I shook my head. “I can't.” I pleaded with him to understand. “I can't leave him alone like this.”

He tilted my head to look at him. I stared at those mesmerizing cobalt-blue eyes. “We can not take him with us. We must leave him here.”

I obediently nodded in agreement. He helped me to my feet before stepping into the room closest to the hallway window and came out with a chair. Before I could ask, he threw the chair at the window, breaking the glass, then stretched out his hand to me and said, “We will leave through here.”

I took one last look back at my uncle before taking Von's hand. Mixed emotions of despair, sadness, grief and pain played havoc inside my heart. He had always been strong and invincible to me. Even as the years passed and I had noticed how much he had aged, it was still hard to believe that he was gone, to never be around, to never see his face, his smile, the sound of his voice, and his laughter. How could he be dead? It couldn't be true. I could still feel the warmth of his skin on my hand; maybe...just maybe...there was some hope, some miracle...

I felt a tug on my arm and I turned to face Von with a desperate plead on my face. “I don't know how to say good-bye.”

I could see the helplessness in his expression and it pains me to know that grief is the one thing

that could never be cured.

“I am sorry.” He said before guiding me to the window.

Within seconds we were in the air falling fast to the ground. He whispered under his breath and slowly we started to float down until our feet softly touched the ground. Immediately, I was pushed to the side and fell hard to the ground. I did not realize that someone, or actually, something, was waiting for us. Von had seen him or it and moved me away. He took a knife to his side that was meant for me. I screamed, as the creature lunged for me as Von went down. When the creature was about to strike, I placed my hands up, a poor attempt to block the blow, and a burst of light came through my hands. The creature stepped back screaming with intense pain as the light surrounded him before he burst into flames. The fire engulfed him before it sucked back into itself and both the creature and the fire disappeared. Silence descended where we lay. I stared in disbelief at what I had just done. Slowly I got up and quickly moved to Von's side. He did not look good. He was pale, sweating, and in pain. I saw that he was holding his left side with his hand trying to stop the flow of blood.

“We need to go back in and have them take care of you,” I said while trying to pull him up.

“We cannot go back in there. We have to move and hide somewhere.”

“You're bleeding. You may die if we don't get this taken care of.”

“Look inside my bag for a packet.”

I opened the small pouch that he had strapped around his waist and I took out the packet he was referring to. When I opened it, there was a leaf sprinkled with white powder. He took the leaf from me and placed the powder side down on his wound. He winced at the pain.

“This will help a little until we are back at the campsite.” He went on before I could protest. “We cannot go back to the hospital. The urichs would be free from the spell by now and I do not have the energy to fight them. Plus, there will be more moricks coming.”

I looked around as I said, “Where can we go?”

He also looked. “Over there.” He nodded to the construction site a couple of blocks away.

I helped him up and supported him as we walked to our hiding place. I was worried. His breathing was uneven and shallow. He was getting weaker by the minute. I could tell that he was focusing all of his concentration into putting one foot in front of the other. A couple of times he would have fallen if I wasn't holding on to him. I could tell he needed, wanted rest but he kept moving; determined to get to safety. When we were at the construction site, he stopped and looked around the area. The first and second floor was too exposed he told me before pointing with his chin to the third floor. We quickly got into an elevator that was constructed for the purpose of carrying workers and small materials easily through each floors. When we were on the third floor, we walked around a bit before he spotted a small room with no windows and only one door to go in or out.

“Go lock the door while I secure this room,” he said as he let go of me and slowly walked with unsteady feet to the center of the room. There he stopped and took out his crystal. He whispered something under his breath before he went down to the ground.

“Von!”

“I am all right. Help me to the wall,” he said.

I helped him to the nearest wall, settled myself next to him and moved him until his head was resting on my lap.

“If anything happens to me, promise me you will not leave this room and wait for Shuron.”

“Don't say that. You will be fine. I will go and find some help.”

“No.” He said as he grabbed my arm. “It is not safe out there. I have already sent word out to Shuron of what happened. He will find us.”

“How did—When did—” Never mind. Von must have done some magic to let Shuron know that we were in danger. “So he knows where we are?”

He shook his head. “I was unable to do so, but do not worry. He will track us down.”

“I hope he find us soon. You need help.”

“I will be fine. I just need to rest for a while,” he said before closing his eyes.

His face was pale and his whole body was so still that if I hadn't seen his chest rising and falling, I would have thought he was dead. I closed my eyes trying to hold back my tears. Images of my uncle flooded my mind. Memories of him collided, rattled and jumbled inside my head. The first time I met him, my graduation, my birthdays, his birthdays, the camping trips, the anniversary of my parent's death, him in the hospital and him lying on the floor lifeless. I opened my eyes and blinked several times to stop the tears.

Uncle Ned was well liked by everyone. He wasn't shy, but a quiet person who kept to himself. He preferred to listen to others as they talked than to be the one who does the talking. He rarely mentioned of his life before we met years ago. And he often evaded my questions on that subject. When I was young, while my parents were still alive, he would often come to visit us. And stayed for one or two days before he left again on his 'wild adventure,' as my dad would say. I was too young to remember him. It was only from my father's stories of him that I had a little glimpse of who he was. Since Uncle Ned was a child, he had always been a loner and loved to wander. When he turned eighteen, he packed up his bag and went off traveling. First in the U.S. Then the world.

When he was able to, my uncle would send postcards to my dad of the places he had been to. My dad would show them to me and we would pull up a map and search for these places and then find anything we could about the land, the people and their culture. I had asked him once why my uncle moved around so much. Dad would shrug his shoulders and said he had always been that way. Even as a kid my uncle could never stay still. As I learned more about these places he visited, I began to realize why he traveled so much. Uncle Ned loved to see the world and what it had to offer. He loved to experience new things, meet new people and find new discoveries. He was a person who loved to learn about different cultures and their different ideas. He was an adventurer and a traveler who searched for the history of life in others but, ironically, had no roots of his own. That was how I remembered him and that was how I saw him as. A traveler passing by to go on to the next adventure.

For the first couple of weeks of living together, I was so afraid that he was going to leave me and I would be alone again. I didn't know how he knew about my feelings, but one night he sat me down and said to me that he didn't know what to do with me. And even though he didn't know how to take care of someone other than himself, he would never give up trying. He was never going to leave me and he was never going to regret staying. From that moment on, I felt like I could breathe again and that I was able to relax. I wished I could say that we lived peacefully from then on. We had our differences and we had our arguments. And through it all, he had kept his word and never gave up. Tears were streaming down my face as I thought of him and the last image of him lying on the floor. I wiped my tears away and forced myself to stop crying. Now was not the time to mourn him even though I wanted to. Von and I were still in danger and I needed to stay focused. Later, I thought to myself, later when we were safe, I would then mourn his death.

## Chapter 6

Hours had passed and my doubts grew stronger of Shuron or anyone else finding us. I was so afraid. Von took on a grayish hue, his body temperature was high and he was shivering uncontrollably. He was getting worse by the minute. I tried not to cry and to think about what my uncle had said to me whenever I found myself in trouble, that crying was not going to solve my problems. Only sheer will, determination—or what he liked to call it stubbornness—and using one's brain will get oneself out of any situation. And if that didn't work, run like hell. Running was not an option here. Which left the others to work with. Unfortunately, at that moment, I lacked the constitution for any of them. Several minutes passed and I couldn't sit still anymore and watch him fade away. I knew I had to go and find help regardless of the danger I would face out there. I was about to get up when straight ahead, at the door, Shuron walked in. I didn't dare blink for fear that he would disappear if I did.

“You found us?” I said with relief and disbelief in my voice.

“It helps that Von and I are blood brothers. I can sense his presence when I need to.”

“I think he is dying.” I said with quivering voice as we both looked down at him. “Please, tell me I am wrong.”

“We will not know until the healers have seen him.”

I stopped him when he was about to pick Von up. “There were moricks that were after us. That is...that is how he got stabbed.”

“You do not need to worry. I have taken care of them. That is the reason I am late coming here.”

With one swift motion, Shuron lifted him up and over his shoulder. There was a small grunt of pain coming from Von before he quieted.

“It will be quicker if we leave from here to the campsite instead of going back to the park. I would need to use your magic.”

“I don't understand. What is the difference between the park and here?”

“As you have seen before, we are able to use our magic to create an opening to another place. But there are limitations. One of them is we can only create an opening within five miles in any direction from where we stand. If I use your magic, I will be able to increase the distance of the place where we need to go.”

I nodded, then I thought about what Loquis had said about others using Keya's magic. “Aren't you afraid it will turn you evil?”

“I will not be holding on to it for long.” He went on when he saw my hesitation. “You need not worry, I can resist the temptation.”

“Why is that?”

“My magic is a level five. As long as the crystal is not in my possession for a long period of time, I can resist the temptation to take the magic for my own and for it to turn me evil.”

Satisfied with the answer, I handed over the necklace. He drew a line in the air, from top to bottom. A glow of light started to appear, tracing the line that he drew before it widened and I could see a campsite in front of us. He went through first and I reluctantly went after him. Loquis and the elders were waiting for us. Shuron quickly walked past them to Von's cort and they followed behind him. When he placed Von down on his bed, one of them, whom I assume was a healer, came forward and sat on a chair that someone had moved next to the bed. He slowly peeled back the leaf Von had placed on his wound and replaced it with his hand. He closed his eyes in concentration. He was still for a couple of minutes before he took his hand away, got up, and left the room. The healer went over to Shuron and whispered something to him before leaving.

I was about to ask Shuron if Von would be all right when Mirra rushed over, moving others aside who had gathered around us. When she saw the look on Shuron's face, she cried out. He tried to place

his arms around her, but she stepped back, not wanting to be comforted. She turned and saw me standing there at the entrance. Wiping her tears, she walked calmly to me. We stood face to face, both of our eyes red and teary, before she slapped me on the cheek.

“Mirra!” Shuron shouted at her in surprise.

“You selfish, irresponsible fool. It is all your fault that he is dying. Why did you not just stay here where it is safe?”

“Stop it, Mirra,” Shuron said.

She wasn't listening and pulled away when he tried to move her aside. “You had to go out there knowing Nara was looking for you, knowing it was dangerous. Well, I hope you are happy. Von is dying. He is dying because of you!” Mirra shouted the last few words.

“It is not her fault,” Shuron said as he grabbed her arm again.

She shrugged it off and turned on him. “It is her fault, or have you forgotten that he is destined to die so she can live?”

“That is enough, Mirra; she does not deserve this.”

“Von is the one who does not deserve this,” she said before pushing me aside to go in.

Shuron stared at the door from where she had disappeared. Loquis placed a hand on his shoulder. “Go to her. She will need you right now. I will see to Cassiea,” he reassured him. Shuron, looking grateful for his help, nodded and went after Mirra.

I turned to watch him go in. Then I looked at everyone who was gathered around us, watching the commotion. Some stared at me accusingly, some looked away, and others whispered to each other while nodding to me disapprovingly. Loquis placed his hand on my arm and gently pushed me up the stairs. I let him lead me away, I also wanted to leave as quickly as I could from everyone's prying eyes. I did not want to face their judgments of what I had done to one of their own people. I was numb and tired. What Mirra had said was swarming in my head as I tried to comprehend her accusation. What did she mean, he was destined to die because of me? What were they not telling me? What were they hiding from me?

I realized we were going up a spiral staircase. “I did not know Von's room was below mine.” I said. I don't know why I even thought or said such an inappropriate and inane thing at a time like this.

“We felt that you would feel more comfortable if someone you knew was close by if you needed any help.”

So that explained how Von had heard and got to my room so fast when I was having my nightmare. Thinking about the nightmare brought back everything that had happened. My eyes started to tear and I blinked a couple of times to keep them from falling.

“I am sorry,” I said.

He patted my arm and said, “It is not your fault. We cannot always control everything that happens in our life.”

“It is all my fault. If I hadn't left, they would still be alive.”

He stopped me when we were at my door. “You do not know that, Cassiea; nobody knows that.”

“We do know that Von is going to die because of me; isn't that what Mirra said. He will die so I can live.”

“Do not take her words to heart, Cassiea. Mirra was not speaking logically. Visions are not always what they appear to be.”

“Does that mean he is going to live?”

He shook his head and sighed. “Hard to say. Visions of the future are always unstable and indecipherable. I see you hold him in your arms as he lay dying, but that is only one part of the whole story.”

“I don't understand.”

“It is similar to someone handing you a drawing and you need to guess the whole story from what you see from it. What comes before or what comes after is only a guess. I see you holding Von in your

arms. His eyes were closed and I could feel him dying. I do not know what happened before that vision and I do not know what will happen after that vision. We can only take what we see and prepare ourselves for what is to come. A vision is only a glimpse of an image, but it does not tell you everything.

It is just like when I knew it was you who was destined to have Keya's magic. I saw several visions of you, at different times and at different places. And in each vision, I noticed you have that crystal around your neck. I knew that it contained Keya's magic because I was able to sense it. I knew that you were not from our world because, in all of my visions, I saw buildings in the background or you were in rooms that are similar to rooms in your world. I also know that you will be able to handle Keya's magic because in those visions I felt no evil emanating from you. You were using your magic to help not to harm.”

“There is more to it, isn't there? Why did Mirra say that he was destined to die because of me? You had more than one vision of Von's death. That is why she is certain I am responsible for it. That is why you won't deny he will die because of me.”

Loquis was quiet and somber, not knowing what to say.

“It is true? It has to be true. What you see will occur. He is destined to die because of me. There has to be a way to change it.”

“Cassiea, do not try to think too much about this. Learn from our mistakes. What is and what will be will always stay true no matter how many directions you go. The out come will always be the same.”

“Are you telling me that visions of the future will always come true? It could never be changed? Somehow, I find that hard to believe.”

“That is not what I am implying, Cassiea. There are some futures that are destined. It is unwise to try to change it for we will make it worse no matter how careful we are.”

“How is trying to save a persons life making things worse?”

“Good intentions are sometimes a devil in disguise. We have learned this too often and forget too fast. Please, let us continue our conversation another time. You are tired and need rest.”

I did not believe him. There had to be a way to change the vision. Wasn't there a saying about the future not being written yet? And, I didn't see the harm in trying to save someone's life. Especially when I know they will die. Isn't that what you should do when you know someone is going to die? You find a way to save that person. I did not say any of this to him. I knew he would argue with me about it and I didn't want to hear it. I thanked him and went inside. I walked over to the bed, stood there, and stared at it. As tired as I was, I couldn't sleep. I sat on a chair by the window instead and watched the scenery outside, but not really seeing anything. I felt so helpless, as if my life was spinning out of control. I felt lost in a haze of fog, trapped into walking around without any direction. Somehow, I had to find a way to take control. I had to find my way or else I would be lost again. Like I had been when my parents died, before Uncle Ned found me and took me in.

My mind swirled with thoughts and images of all that had happened. I wondered how my life had changed so drastically, so fast. It had only been two days, but it felt like a life-time ago when I had walked that day in the park. Everything was changing, and all I wanted to do was to go back to that day and stay there; never knowing anything other than my own existence. I wanted to go down the path where I met my uncle at the hospital as I had intended to do.

“Uncle Ned,” I whispered softly. I missed him already. Now that I was alone, I wanted to cry, to grieve, but the tears wouldn't come. I had held the tears in for so long and now, now that I could finally cry, I couldn't.

A couple of hours had passed before I saw Shuron and Mirra walk out of Von's room. I had not seen him since we got back and I wanted to be by his side. I got up and headed downstairs. At a distance, Von looked calm and peaceful. But as I got closer, I could see the frown on his brow and the perspiration on his forehead. He looked to be in pain and it was all my fault. I burst into tears then. All

the adrenaline of the past two days and all that I had lost, overwhelmed me and I was finally able to release it.

“Please,” I said between sobs, “please don't die. You have to live.”

I laid my cheek on his chest, closed my eyes and listened to his breathing. I felt the movement of his chest rising and falling. Slowly, my hand moved to rest above his wound. There was an intense heat resonating from there, as if that area was in flames. I couldn't explain it, but I also felt darkness. There was an empty void in that area and it was spreading throughout his body. It was such an ominous feeling that it sickened and nauseated me. Without thinking, I replaced the darkness in my mind with light. I visualized and concentrated on the feeling of the joy and beauty of the first light of day; in the early morning when the sun rose up into the sky. I remembered the feeling of the cool damp earth beneath my feet. And how the coolness of the moist earth, that had not yet been warmed from the sun, was refreshing. I pushed that thought, that feeling through me and into the blackness and the heat that was coming from his wound. Somehow, I knew I couldn't let the darkness win. Using all of my strength, I concentrated hard on all the happy memories that I had with uncle Ned and when I first saw Von. I absorbed the darkness within my light. I pushed everything that was bright and joyous in my life and used it to smother the darkness. Slowly I could feel Von stirring and soon a hand lightly touched my cheek. I opened my eyes to meet his and smiled as my eyes started to tear up again. “You are awake.”

“Cassiea,” he whispered before holding me close to him. He kissed each of my eyelids before lowering to my lips.

“I'm sorry,” I said when he moved away. “I couldn't get rid of it all.”

I felt drained and my eyelids felt heavy. I tried to stay awake, but I could feel myself drifting away.

## Chapter 7

My whole body felt awful as if someone had used me as a punching bag. My stomach was nauseated and I had a migraine.

“Ah, I see that you are awake.” Loquis said.

“What happened?” I asked him as he helped me sit upright.

“You do not remember?”

“I remember being in Von's room. How did I end up here and why does my whole body feels like it was run over by a huge truck?”

“That will happen when you bring someone back who is near death; at least, that is my guess.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Do you know why our healers were unable to heal him?” When I shook my head, he went on.

“His injury was not caused by an ordinary knife wound. There was a spell on it that even a mere scratch from the knife was enough to kill a person. Von was dying from the stab wound and you gave him back his life.”

“How did I do that?”

“It is very hard to explain. In its most simplest terms, our body is an empty shell. What makes it function is the presences of a core, a soul and essence. The core is where your stored thoughts, feelings and ideas resides. It is your individuality. The soul is the energy that charges the body. And essence is the elixir of life. It maintains the body, keeps it functioning and holds the soul inside of you. All three can work as one. All three can work separately as independent entity. And all three can be combined into one. Von's essence was being absorbed by the poison from the spell cast on the knife. Without his essence, his body was unable to function and his core and soul could not stay within it. You replaced his essence with some of yours, but by doing so, you have limited your life span.”

“I can do this? How is that possible?”

“Our healers are able to do this as well, to transfer their essence to someone else when that person is close to death. But they have to be a level five and it will forfeit their life.”

“You mean they will die from this? If that is the case, then why am I still here?”

“Keya had consumed many magical powers from others. There was enough magic to keep you alive but not from taking some of your life span. Though it was surprising that you were able to heal him at all. My guess is your connection to your magic is growing quickly.” He was quiet for a moment in thought before saying, “It is strange though, that she sought to acquire more healing powers.”

“Why would you say that?” I asked.

“Her gift was the power to heal. Her level of magic was a two. There was more than enough to heal herself if she was hurt. And so, it is strange that she would acquired more, considering it requires a sacrifice of one's self to use it.”

“What is wrong with getting more healing powers? And, what kind of sacrifice?”

“Healing is a form of giving one's self to another. Most healers do not live long because it costs them each time they use their gift. If a level-five healer were to bring Von back as you did, it means forfeiting their life with no guarantees that Von would live. And so, it is strange she had acquired that many. Unless...”

“Unless what?”

“All talents have a negative and a positive. It all depends on how the person uses it. Healing may be used as a form of torture and death.”

“Was it so important for her to be this strong?”

“Once you get a taste of blood magic, it is hard to turn back.” Loquis got up from the chair and walked to the window. “The real Keya, before she was addicted to blood magic, was a very sweet-



tempered person. It was after the death of her child that she changed.”

“Tell me what happened.”

“She always wanted a child. It is very hard for our people to conceive. When she was finally blessed with one, she was overjoyed. During that time, there was a feud that had been going on for centuries among our clans. None of us really remembered what had started it. Our clan was split in half and it was during one of our disputes that her child was killed. She blamed all of us for her child’s death. For several days afterward, she did not speak to anyone or eat anything. Then one day, she started to talk and she started to eat. We all thought she was getting better, until a few weeks later she disappeared. We were unable to find her.

Years later we heard rumors of someone using blood magic to steal magic from others. As hard as we tried, we could not find the person who was responsible until later when she revealed herself to us. We were so busy fighting among ourselves that we did not see her rise to power. And because of her, we had joined together to fight her. Back then, there were six clans. All of us lost a lot of our people. The TezMir clans suffered the most. Their numbers were greatly reduced and their lord had already died during our clan war. There were so few of us left after our clan war. And our numbers decreased even more during the war with Keya.”

“Did you or any of the visors have visions of her at all? Did any of you see future battles with her?”

“All of us were too focused on our clan war to think or worry about other matters. When I and other visors became aware of her through our visions, it was too late. As I said, no one knew who was responsible for the killing of innocents for their magic. Our visions can easily be tampered with or be blocked from viewing if someone had enough power. Keya had accumulated a great deal of it and she knew how to hide herself well.

Before she died, after I transferred her magic to the crystal, she told me that, in the beginning, all she wanted was to stop us from fighting each other. But now that she had a taste of the blood, all she wanted was to destroy us all. She begged me to end her life. She knew she would not stop if she was still alive. By then, whether I wanted to or not, she was already leaving this world.”

“And what about her sister, Nara? What is her story?”

“Their father was the lord of TezMir clan who died during our clan war. After the war with Keya, the rest of that clan broke off all contact with us. Nara left with them. We have not seen or found any trace of them or her since then until she appeared to us when she tried to take the crystal the first time. And then again, when I started to have visions of you.”

“Do you think the TezMir clan is helping her?”

“I do not know. We have sent a scout to find out if they or anyone else is helping her. But, I believe she is doing this on her own.” When he saw that I was getting sleepy he got up to go. “I will let you get some rest.”

“Loquis,” I said and waited until he turned around before continuing, “Von is not dead. He will not die because of me.”

He did not speak but nodded his head and left.

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Shuron was at the door waiting for him. When they were a good distance away, he spoke, “Why did you not tell her that you still see the vision?”

“It will be of no use. She needs to realize that visions, which are fated to be, can not be changed no matter what you do.”

“I cannot help but feel that it is unwise for her to handle so much burden.”

“She has a good heart and I believe in her. In the end, she will do the right thing. Besides, she is the only one who can handle this magic.”

“I still feel unease about it.”

“Trust me, Shuron, she will come through in the end. You need patience. The road is very long with a lot of obstacles along the way. Just remember to observe very carefully. What she needs is someone to be by her side and to be her friend. She will be the only one with a level of magic greater than anyone of us knows. We will need her help in the future.”

“Is there something you are not telling us? Did you have another vision about her?”

“No, it is just a feeling I have.”

“I do not like it when you have one of your feelings.”

“Trust me, Shuron, this magic is in good hands. I need your promise to keep an eye on her, no matter what happens.”

“You are contradicting yourself, Loquis. You say this magic is safe with her and yet you want me to keep an eye on her.”

“It is not that I do not trust her. I am afraid she does not trust us. This is a very delicate time for her. A lot has happened to her in such a short period of time. It will be hard for her to adjust with our way of life. She will be vulnerable. She will need our guidance.”

“I understand. Do not worry; I have also made a promise to Von that I will take care of her if anything should happen to him.”

“Remonestil, Shuron.”

Shuron looked at him in surprise. Remonestil was a spell that binds a promise; it would mean a curse to him and all he holds dear. It was rarely used and it was sometimes against their law to use it because there were no other spells that could counter-act it. “Remonestil, Loquis. I would think my promise would be enough.”

“I need to make sure. There will be hard times ahead and I need you to remember your promise.”

“I wish you would tell me.”

“It is just a feeling.”

“It disturbs me when you say that.”

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## Chapter 8

It was late in the afternoon when I woke up. Feeling better now, I decided to go down the stairs to see how Von was doing. I stopped at the foot of his bed not wanting to disturb him. He looked so pale, almost translucent, like a ghost. For a minute, I feared Loquis had lied to me, that Von had died. My fear subsided when he stirred and his eyes opened to meet mine. I smiled and walked over to him. He sat up as I approached and took my hand when I sat down.

“I owe you my life.”

“You owe me nothing.”

“I thought I had more time, but...”

“We do. Loquis was wrong. You are alive.”

“Cassiea, I love you. I love you for so long.”

I smiled and was about to reply when there was a knock at the door. Shuron came in.

“I am sorry to interrupt. The elders have gathered.”

I didn't know what was going on, but I helped Von to his feet and we followed him to the gathering. Mirra was there. She looked down at our linked hands and turned away abruptly. We were the last to arrive.

“I have bind us,” Loquis began, “to make sure that no words spoken here will be uttered outside of this circle. If anyone should speak of this...”

I stopped listening. I couldn't concentrate on what was going on around me. My mind drifted and I thought again of Uncle Ned and our times together. And the times we would never have. I felt broken. Lost. He was the glue that held me together. He was the only family I had. What would I do now? Where would I go? I remembered him in his favorite chair with an unlit pipe in his mouth, a habit that stayed after he quit smoking. I remembered all those walks we had shared in the early mornings, when he would accompany me through the park on my way to work. The camping trips we had gone on. And, the times he had held me, on those days and nights, when I cried during the anniversary of my parents' deaths. There was an empty space inside of me that I didn't even know existed. It grew even more now that he was gone. I wondered how much bigger it would get before there was none of me left.

I felt a light touch on my hand and looked up to see Von with an expression of concern on his face. He was still so pale from his near brush with death. I gave him a reassuring smile, an assurance that I did not really feel. Would he be taking over my uncles place? The glue that holds me together? Would he be the one to hold on to me when I cried in mourning over my uncles death? Did I even have the right to ask that of him? Uncle Ned died because of me. Von almost died because of me. And as long as Keya's magic was still in this crystal, he would always be in danger. Should I be selfish to use him that way?

I was jarred from my thoughts when Mirra abruptly stood up.

“No. absolutely not. We can not take her to our home. We will be defenseless to any attacks if Nara or anyone else tries to get to her. It is best if we keep her in one of our clans campsites.”

“I am in agreement with the elders. Our numbers are greater if we protect her at home and the opal will give us an additional protection,” Shuron said.

“And what about the children? They will be in harm's way,” Mirra said.

“They will be protected.”

“I agree with her,” I got up to say. “The fewer people who are in danger because of me, the better.”

Shuron turned to me. “It will be difficult to keep you safe at a campsite when an enemy can come from all sides. And also, there are not enough scouts to secure the three-mile radius of the campsite to prevent possible attacks. There are protective barriers surrounding our home that are used to prevent

any animals or creatures from wandering in, which can be easily modified to prevent certain people from entering.”

“But what if they do get in?” I said. “You told me before that Nara almost took the crystal. If it wasn't for the spell that was cast on it, she would have it already.”

“She is right,” Mirra said. “If we did not cast a spell, Nara would have the crystal now. And, we had lost a lot of people that day trying to stop her.”

“She was able to get in because one of our own betrayed us and there were too many of us who knew where the crystal was. This time we have taken precautions from the very beginning when we knew Cassiea was coming to us.” Shuron turned to me. “The only people who knows of our plan are us. I had Loquis bind us from speaking of this to anyone. If someone speaks of this out of their own free will or from any outside influences we will all know it and be ready.”

“But what about the people at the campsite? They know that I am here.”

“Yes, they do. That is why we will be moving.”

“Cassiea, Shuron is right—you will be safer at our home,” Von said to me.

I looked into those cobalt-blue eyes, so mesmerized by them. “Are you sure Von? I don't want anyone get hurt because of me.”

“I promise you everyone will be fine and Nara will not come near you while you are there.”

I nodded in agreement. I had a feeling he was right and it was the safest place to be.

“Then we better go. We have stayed in one place far too long,” Shuron said before turning to the rest of them. “We will part here.”

“I want to go with you,” Mirra said.

“Mirra—”

“Let her go.” Loquis intervened before Shuron could object.

Shuron looked at him. I could tell he wanted to argue with him, but nodded his head instead. I watched in amazement as each of them held out a crystal, said something under their breath and several images of the four of us appeared beside each elder and Loquis. Shuron explained that this would confuse, distract and make it harder for anyone who wanted to find me. They then drew a line in the air. When the opening appeared, they stepped through. Once they were gone, Shuron made an opening for us. I could see another campground on the other side.

“We will stay here for a short while; just enough for everybody to spread word of your presence here before moving on. Then we will move through several campsites before camping in the forest on our own for the rest of our journey,” he said to me.

I nodded in understanding. He turned and walked into the opening. Mirra went next. Then Von took my hand and gave me an encouraging smile before leading me through. I was exhausted by the time Shuron was satisfied with the breadcrumbs we placed for anyone who was looking for me.

Uncle Ned and I had done a lot of hiking in the forest during our camping excursions. Most of the time we would take complicated, hard or treacherous trails just to *spice* things up, as he liked to call it. He was always up for a good challenge and he got me hooked on it. So, I wasn't worried and was actually looking forward to it when we started heading into the forest. But after a couple of days, I regretted it. Their pace was fast and grueling. It didn't help much that my legs were shorter than theirs; for every one step they took, I had to take two. They only needed a few minutes of rest between each hike that I was unable to build up my energy before moving on which made it even harder for me to keep up with them. Sometime we would travel during the early morning, during the day or during the late afternoon. Other times, we would travel by night. Von told me it was their way of keeping us safe; not just from anyone who was looking for me but also from the creatures that lived in the woods. I don't know how in the world they were able to walk or find their way in the forest, in the dark at night, with just the moonlight guiding them but they move gracefully through the forest without trouble. I, on the other hand, stumbled so many times that I ended up holding onto Von's arm in a death grip. I was a little bit peeved that they didn't even look a bit tired or disheveled as I did. By their appearance, they

looked as if they were just strolling through the park. I was determined not to say anything or make any noise that would give away how tired, exhausted and unprepared I was, despite my experience. I had to admit to myself that I was stubborn to ask them to slow down or to rest a bit more. And, I was eager to get to our destination. When we finally stopped, after what seemed like hours of walking, night has fallen. I prayed this meant we were going to camp here for the night.

“We will rest here for a little while,” Shuron said to me and only me.

I guessed he knew I was on the verge of fainting with fatigue. I sat down and closed my eyes then I opened them to see dawn was breaking through the sky. I stretched and then winced at the stiffness of my muscles. I smiled as I watched the sunrise and thought of all the memories I had of walking through the park. Though it was only a couple of days since I met them, I already miss those times as if it had been years. And, I wondered how many more days were left before my life would be back to normal. Sensing someone watching me, I turned around to see Mirra standing some distance away. When our eyes met, she motioned me, with a tilt of her head, to follow. I searched and found Von and Shuron leaning against a tree, asleep. Quietly as I could, I got up and followed her. When we were some distance away, she stopped and turned to face me.

“You are a very loud sleeper. Loud enough to wake the dead. I am surprised no one has found us from all the noise you have made,” she said as she glared at me.

My face turned red from embarrassment. Gee, what am I supposed to say to that? Umm, sorry? It will not happen again? A picture formed in my mind of Von watching me snoring and I groaned inward in embarrassment. I was snapped out of my thought when she started to speak.

“I do not like you,” she bluntly said. “I think they were wrong in letting you run free. You should be locked up and heavily guarded until that magic is absorbed within you. You are irresponsible, stubborn, and selfish. You do not know how to use this magic to protect yourself and yet you place yourself and Von into a situation that none of you can handle on your own. You refused to listen to reason when we warned you that going back was not safe. You do not care about us or the danger you will put us in if the crystal falls into the wrong hands.”

I was already feeling terrible for what I had done and she made me feel even worse. Even though what she said was true, and no matter how ashamed I was of myself, I pushed that feeling deep down and let my anger surface. I was officially pissed off. I had enough of them, their stories and their magic. I definitely did not need or want this. I took off the necklace that the crystal was attached to and held it out to her.

“Take it,” I said to her when she just stood there looking at me.

When she still didn't move, I threw it on the ground next to her. “You are right. I did put him in harm's way. I am stubborn and refused to listen to all of you. And, I don't care about anyone but me. I did not ask for this. All of this was a shock to me. I had only a day to come to terms with this huge responsibility. I had only a day to change my belief in magic, something that, throughout all of my childhood, I was led to believe wasn't real. I had one day to let it sink in that there was another world within mine. I had one day to know everything about your people. And frankly, I just don't care anymore. If you feel so strongly that I will do more harm than good, then you take it. You can keep that magic within it and I will gladly take the responsibility off of my hands and go home. My home.” Or what was left of it, I thought to myself.

I walked away feeling a little bit lighter now that I didn't have to worry about magic and people coming after me. Of course this feeling didn't last. I heard Mirra calling out to me and her foot steps coming near. She turned me around and placed the necklace on my hand. She seemed oddly relieved to be rid of the thing considering she was totally against my involvement in having it. I gave her a questioning look and waited. It didn't take long.

“I am sorry. It is just—” She turned slightly in frustration. I could see there was something she wanted to tell me.

“If I don't know everything, I will never understand why this is so important to all of you.”

She turned back to me. With a short nod, she said, "All of them do not want to tell you this. They are afraid that if you knew, you would be scared and will not help us."

"What is it?" I encouraged her.

"Loquis had visions of your future. Over time, you will turn evil. He has foreseen the destruction you will cause and the many lives you will destroy."

They were right. I was scared and very tempted to back out. I am not a courageous person. I am no hero. "I don't understand. Why on earth did you guys want me to be here then? Why do you want me to have this magic?"

"Because when Loquis told us about you, we looked into possible futures."

"What do you mean, 'possible futures'?"

She gave me an impatient look, as if I should have known about this already and my interruption was not appreciated. "One of our people has the gift to see the preal, to see into multiple or possible futures. When she looked into a vision of a future where your involvement was non-existent, in every scenario, it means the destruction of the whole world. Everyone on Earth will be destroyed along with every living thing in it."

I sucked in my breath and let it out slowly. I guessed ignorance is bliss. "So, I am the lesser of two evils."

She nodded. "If you have the magic, at least it will only be us who suffers. Having the magic within you will give you immense power. None of us knows how great the power of this magic is. But since your knowledge of using it is almost non-existent, we have a better chance of defeating you and killing you if we have to. Once the magic is absorbed within you, we can destroy it if we need to."

I was a hairline away from running. What stopped me was that I knew for a fact that, no matter where I might go, they would find me. "So all of you are waiting for me to absorb the magic in order to destroy it by killing me."

"No, I said that if we needed to, we can destroy it. In the visions we also saw your benefits to us and to your world. Loquis especially saw what your future with us will be. He believes strongly the good you will do will out-weight the bad you will become. Our lord and the elders agree with him. They have decided to entrust Shuron with the responsibility of looking after you and if the time comes, when you turn, he will be the one to kill you."

"Well that will not happen. I will not let myself turn. Now that I know everything, I can change it."

"You are fooling yourself if you think that is true. Loquis was chosen to be our visor because his visions are never wrong."

"But I have changed it. Von is still alive. You told me that he was supposed to die, but he didn't."

"Stop being stupid!" she snapped. "You may have saved him this time, but the vision of his death in your arms is just as strong. That is because Loquis' vision has not come to pass. He still sees Von's death."

"But...why did he lead me to believe—why didn't he tell me..." I said as I turned to look at Von as he lay sleeping.

"That is something you will have to ask him about." She watched me for a while before saying, "I know how you can help him."

I turned around and she continued. "I also do not want to see him die. I had a vision of you in a cave. You were able to absorb all of the magic within you. I do not know when this will come to pass, but I do know where the cave is. I can show you how to get there. If you are able to absorb the magic sooner, then Von will not need to protect you."

"Where is it?"

She came over and touched my left temple with her finger-tips. Suddenly a flash of what I could only describe as a very fast movie or video playing in my mind that started from where we were standing to my final destination. I stepped back to steady myself from the slight dizziness I felt after it was over. Amazing. Within minutes, I knew exactly where and how I would get there.

“You better go. The sooner you leave the sooner you can absorb the magic.”

“You are not coming with me?”

“I have to stay and wait until they wake up. I have put them into a deep sleep that will keep them from awakening to any sounds or disturbance for a couple of hours. They will be vulnerable out here in the forest if I do not stay to protect them.”

“They don’t know about this then.”

“They do not. They will prevent you from going. Do you want that?”

I shook my head. But still, I felt uneasy at the thought of walking into the forest alone.

“Can't you create an opening?” I said while motioning with my arms in the air. “Like what you guys did before and transport me over there?”

“The distance is too great, plus any magic we use, others might sense it. We do not want Nara or any of her minions to know where you are.”

Well, I guessed that was why we had been walking through the forest instead of using that hole or doorway or whatever it was called to travel.

“Not to worry, I do not foresee any trouble for you,” she assured me.

Somehow I had a feeling that this was not true, but since I didn't have a choice, I sighed and took a deep breath. This must be how Dorothy felt, I thought before I started to walk.

## Chapter 9

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“Where is she!” Von demanded. “What have you done to her!”

Mirra was taken aback by his accusation. “I have done nothing to her.”

“Then why is she gone? You must have said something to her. What did you say?” he demanded.

Shuron stepped between them. He looked at Von and placed a hand on his shoulder. “Von, calm yourself. You will not get anywhere in the state you are in. Let Mirra explain what happened.”

He kept staring at her for a couple of more seconds before turning around and starting to pace.

“We were just talking when she mentioned that she did not want to get anyone hurt, especially you, Von. I did not want to mention how I had a vision last night, but she insisted on knowing.”

“What is this vision, Mirra?”

She hesitated. She looked over at Von, who was still pacing. Shuron moved and blocked her view of him when she wasn't quick to reply.

“Tell us about your vision,” he encouraged in a soft, mild tone.

“I do not know when this vision was accruing. I saw her in a cave. There must be something in the cave that is able to break the seal of the crystal and release the power within it because I saw her absorbing the magic.”

“And, you just let her go on her own to find this cave? You did not even bother to tell us about this,” Von said, getting even more upset.

“The both of you were sound asleep.”

“And, whose fault is that for making sure we would not awake until now?” Von said in an accusing tone while gathering up his pack of supplies.

“Where are you going?”

“I am going to go and find her and then bring her back. She could not have gone that far.”

“Von, wait!” she said and grabbed his hand. “I only saw her in the cave. No one else. She must do this alone. I have looked and she will not be in any danger going there.”

He pulled his hand from her grasp and started to go when Shuron stopped him. Von turned, ready for a fight.

Shuron held up his hands in a truce. “When you find her, let her make the decision of coming back or going forward.” Shuron placed his hand on Von's shoulder when he was about to protest. “I did not say anything the first time you entranced her into siding with us, but I should have done so the second time.”

“She needs to be protected for herself and for all of our sakes.”

“I know that far better than anyone, Von. I am responsible for all of us and I too do not want to see her harmed. What you are doing is not the right way. If she ever found out what you did to her, do you think she will trust you, or anyone of us, ever again? Though I have only known her for a short period of time, I believe she will do the right thing when the time comes. Just as I trust in your ability to protect her.”

“She has come to mean a lot to me, Shuron. I have no confidence.”

“That is when you need it the most.” Shuron extended his arm to him. “Good hunting, brother.”

Von extended his arm and grasped his. “Good hunting.”

He turned and left. Shuron stopped Mirra when she started to follow.

“Let go. If you are not going to go with him, I will.”

“No, Mirra. I think you have done enough. We will head back to the closest clan where I will gather a few scouts and follow him,” he said as he walked quickly away while pulling her with him.

“I want to go too.”



“That will not be possible.”

“Why not? I have been on scouting missions before.”

“Your skills are not what I am concerned about. It is your judgment that is clouded and of no use to us.”

She pulled away and moved in front of him, forcing him to stop. “I have done nothing wrong. I just told her what I saw in my vision. She chose to go. I did not force her.”

He just looked at her with disappointment and walked around her. She was shocked. She had never seen him like this before. He had always reasoned or argued with her when they had any disagreements, but he had never given her the silent treatment.

“What? Say it!”

He stopped for a minute, turned and walked back. “Did it ever occur to you that your vision might have been compromised?”

“That is not possible.”

He lifted one brow and said, “You know as well as I do that it is very possible. You also know that we do not react in haste at any visions especially one so important and dangerous, until there is a ritual cleansing when your mind is cleared of all impurities.”

She backed away from him, not wanting to hear anymore. “You do not need to tell me what I already know.”

“Are you sure of that because if that is true, Von and Cassiea would not be risking their lives right now.”

“I am trying to save his life!”

“No, Mirra! You were not! You were being foolish and selfish. You are jealous of her and hate the fact that he loves her and not you. And when the opportunity came to get rid of her, you grabbed it without thinking about the consequence.”

“That is not true. I may not like her or like the fact that he will die because of her, but I have done nothing except help.”

“If you will not admit to what is wrong, then there is no need for me to say anything more.”

He turned and walked away. She called out to him, but he kept on moving. She ran up to him and again stopped him from moving forward.

“Fine. I will say it. I am jealous of her. I do hate the fact that he loves her instead of me. You don’t know what it is like to see the person you love with someone else. It hurts.”

“I know.” She looked at him in surprise. “I have watched you since childhood following Von around and I was unable to do anything about it. I bullied him because I was so jealous, but that did not work. It just made it worse because I have to see the person that I love choose to be with my blood brother rather than me.”

“Why have you not said anything?”

“Would it have made any difference?”

She looked away, not able to look at him anymore. Her action and silence told him everything.

“We have wasted enough time. My advice Mirra, once we are in one of the campsites, is to take the time to do the ritual cleansing.”

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“‘Nothing to worry about,’ she says. I won’t be in any danger, she assured me. Well I should have known better,” I shouted to no one in particular. Then I sighed; I did know better. I was just being stupid. Stupid to think I could do this alone.

Right then and there, I felt like crying. I was in a tree, which I scarcely remembered climbing because of a huge ugly beast—whom I named Billy because he reminded me of a bully that I once knew—saw me and, like his namesake, thought it would be fun to chase after me. He was huge. The shape of his body and facial features reminded me of a bulldog. A very big, very ugly, very menacing

bulldog. But unlike a bulldog, his fur was long and black. He had a hump on his back starting from his neck to midpoint of his spine. I had been waiting for an hour for Billy to get tired and go away, but so far he was as tenacious as I was. I had called for help many times with no rescuers in sight. I didn't know if that was a good thing or a bad thing. There were plenty of people looking for me. And with my luck, it would probably be Nara's minions who would hear my calls for help. So here I was, waiting on top of a tree for someone to come. After thirty more minutes had passed, I sighed. I really didn't want to do this, but I had no choice. I couldn't stay here forever.

Holding on to the branch above me, I slowly got up. I carefully balanced myself so I would not slip and fall into the awaiting claws of my nemesis at the moment. I had this idea which I was not thrilled about implementing, but Billy did not give me any choice. Slowly, sliding one foot at a time, I moved as far as I could to the end of the branch. I tried to ignore the sound of the branch beneath me giving way and the growl of anticipation from the creature below. This was a very bad idea, I thought then. A very stupid idea. But, I couldn't think of anything else. I stretched out as far as I could with one hand, took a big gulp of breath and jumped. I swear, when I thought of this in my mind, it worked. The branches of the tree next to the one I was on looked so close that it seemed logical I could jump over to it easily. Unfortunately, I was wrong. Once again I was being stupid as I screamed at the top of my lungs. I felt nothing but air when I reached out; saw only sky above me. I heard screams and the menacing sounds of Billy below me. Suddenly, I was hit from the side. Then a cloud of green swished above me and covered me in darkness before I felt my body engulfed in something warm, safe and solid. I was whorled around and then seconds later, my breath was knocked out of me. I didn't even get a chance to catch my breath before I was turned around and the next thing I knew, sunlight beamed down on me. The warmth and the heaviness that was wrapped around me was gone.

I lay there on my back trying to get my bearings and wondering what had just happened. First, I was falling. Now, I am on the ground and my body feels surprisingly fine. No broken bones or pain. I remember something hit me and then cushioning my fall. I scrambled up to my feet when I heard a loud growl. Billy. I saw the beast crouching down ready to strike at some thing or someone to my left. I turned to look and saw a man in the same position, on all fours, as Billy was, facing the creature, ready to strike. He must be the one that saved me. They circled each other slowly, not taking their eyes off of each other. Then in a flash, the creature was in the air. The man was quick to react and rolled to the side just in time. But the creature was faster, it turned the second his paws hit the ground, and leaped on top of the man. They struggled and started to roll on the ground. Dust scattered everywhere. I frantically looked and found a very thick stick. I picked it up and was ready to hit Billy with it, but they were moving too fast. Then the beast was on top of him ready to strike. I made my move, then halted when the man used his legs to push upwards—flipping Billy over him. He quickly rolled, grabbed an object from the ground and pointed at the creature. While Billy was in mid-air ready to strike again, he shot. The target met its mark and the creature landed heavily on the ground with a big thump.

I have no idea why, maybe it was curiosity or stupidity, but I slowly crept to where Billy laid. When he twitched, I gave a small yelp, dropped my stick, and moved a couple steps back. A movement caught my eyes and I turned to see the man staring at me. He was angry and displeased. He looked like an Elvain, one of Von's people. He reloaded his weapon that was now attached to his wrist.

“So, you are finally here, Cassiea.”

I was surprised that he knew me. “How do you know my name?” I said.

Ignoring my question, he walked over to me. “Why are you alone? Where is Von? Why is he not with you?” he demanded angrily.

I slowly took a step back and my hand went protectively around the crystal. He stopped when he saw my gesture. A glimpse of hurt ran across his face before he quickly concealed it. I noticed it and was confused by his reaction. Did I somehow forgot that he and I knew each other well? So well that he would be hurt by the fact that I did not trust him? I didn't remember seeing or speaking to him in any of the campgrounds that I was in but then, there were a lot of people there.

“Sorry,” I said as I slowly walked backwards, “I can't talk to you about those things. You know, the whole binding spell and all.”

“I have been informed of everything about you.”

Well that doesn't sound ominous or alarming at all I thought as I moved back even more.

“Then you should know why I am here.”

“I know why you are traveling in the forest. I do not know why you are by yourself and going in the wrong direction.”

“There was a change to the plan. So, I'll just be on my way.”

“You are not going anywhere alone.” He said as he moved closer to me.

“Hold!” I said with one hand out in a stopping motion. I was surprised he listened. “I don't need your company. I will be fine on my own.”

“You almost got yourself killed.”

He did had a point, but I chose to ignore it.

“Listen I don't know you and frankly I don't care. I'm not going to tell you anything. For all I know, you are one of those people who is trying to take this magic.”

“If I wanted your magic, I would have it already.”

“Well, maybe you do want this magic but can't take it from me because you are afraid that I will use it against you so instead you are trying to be nice me so I will let my guard down and then you can take it.”

“Cass,” he said dragging out my name in exasperation and impatience.

I must be imagining things because it sounded like he did that a lot with my name.

“We will stay here until Von finds you.”

“You can stay here and wait for him, if you want, but I'm leaving.” I said and started to walk away. I stopped when I realized he was behind me. “Please, stop following me.”

“No.”

“What do you mean no?”

“I would think it is self explanatory. No means no. I am not going to leave you alone by yourself in these woods, do I need to remind you again that you almost got yourself killed.”

“I was fine and I'll be fine.”

“Cassiea, stop being so stubborn. Where is Von? He is suppose to be with you.”

I was about to say something when I heard a sound behind me. The man moved fast. He was already next to me and was pushing me behind him before I can even turn around towards the sound. He held out his weapon, then quickly lowered it when Von appeared before us.

Von was surprised to see him and asked the man what he was doing here.

“Why are you not protecting her?” The man demanded, ignoring Von's question. “You should have been with her. She almost got herself killed.”

I moved to stand in front of Von, facing the man. “It isn't his fault. I sneaked away when they were sleeping.”

Surprised, he stared at me then at Von for explanation. Von told him that Mirra had placed Shuron and him into a deep sleep and had convinced me to go on on my own. The man did not look pleased, in fact he looked like he was about to murder someone. Without saying a word to us, he abruptly turned to go.

I grabbed hold of his cloak to stop him. “Where are you going?”

“To have a talk with Mirra.”

He moved to go. I held on. “It is not her fault. It was my decision, not hers.”

“It doesn't matter, she should not have left you alone in the forest.”

“But—”

“He is right, Cass.” Von stepped in. “She knew better than to let you venture out by yourself. The forest is dangerous and you do not know anything about this place and what kind of creatures live here.”

You also have no weapons for protection.”

The man moved to go again, then stopped suddenly and turned to face me. Like the others, he was tall. I took a slight step back so I didn't have to tilt my head that far up to look at him. He was staring at me and I stared right back at him.

“Was there something else you want to say to me?”

I shook my head wondering why he asked.

“Then may I go?” he said and looked down at my hands. I looked down also and saw that I was still grabbing onto his cloak. I quickly let go.

“It's not entirely her fault.” I conceded—just a little.

He took a knife from behind his back and placed it in my hand. It looked old, but unused. It was very different from the ones that my uncle had and that he used when we went camping. The handle of this knife was made from wood with strips of leather that wrapped around it. There were a few decorative carvings, mostly lines and grooves that gave it an aesthetic look and, my guess, were meant to be functional as well—to prevent one's grip from sliding. It was surprisingly light and it fitted my hand perfectly. The blade was an inch longer than the handle. Both sides of the blade were sharp. The shape was not straight but curved. It had a wide center and tapered down to a point at one end. At the other end, it tapered down half way into the handle. It looked handmade and I wondered if it had been made by his own hands.

“You are right, you should have known better. But then, you always did use your heart more than your head.”

He looked at the knife in my hand. “Learn how to use it,” he said and then turned once more to leave.

“Wait!” I called.

He stopped and turned to me.

“Thank you,” I said and held up the knife.

He nodded in reply.

“And also, thank you for saving me from Billy.”

When he looked questioningly at me, I gestured to the creature some distance away that was still lying on the ground. My face turned red when I realized I used the name I had given him.

“We—I was up there on the tree for a very long time. I had to call him something,” I explained to the both of them.

His mouth twitched and Von looked away, which I assumed was to hide there laughter. The man gave a slight bow before he left. I looked on and wondered who he was. There was nothing in his appearance that stood out. He looked just as beautiful as the others. His almond-shaped eyes were a light brown. His long hair, that reached to his shoulders, was black with some variation of brown and green highlights. He was dressed in those camouflage greens that I saw most of them wore when I first met them. All in all, there was no difference between him and the others of his race. But, there was something about him that disturbed me. I was confused by my reaction. He was a complete stranger to me and there was nothing in his looks or manner that would make me feel this way. I turned when I felt Von's hands on my shoulders.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

I nodded and asked him who was that man.

“His name is Wolrik Kyre.”

“Is he also helping to protect me?”

“Only the ones who gathered with the elders are here to protect you.”

“Then how does he know about me and what is going on?”

“News spreads quickly upon your arrival. We have been waiting for you to appear before us for quite some time now. But, they have only basic information about you. They do not know the details that were said in the meeting with the elders,” he explained.

“But he said he knew everything about me and why I am here.”

“You must be mistaken. We are the only ones who has the full detail of you.”

I guess that explained why he sounded like he knew me. But still, I had this feeling that he knew me on a more personal level than just rumors that were spreading around here. I looked down at the knife and wondered what I was going to do with it. I was interrupted from my thoughts when Von touched me lightly on the cheek.

“Cass, Mirra told me what you want to do. Is there anyway I can convince you to change your mind?”

I shook my head. “I don't want anyone to get hurt because of me. If I could absorb the magic quickly, then Nara and her minions will stop trying to kill me and no one will get hurt trying to protect me. I don't want anymore deaths on my hands.”

“None of what happened is your fault, Cass.”

“Yes, it is. If I hadn't insisted on going to the hospital to see my uncle, because of a dream, he would still be alive and you wouldn't have been so close to death.” He was about to say something, then I stopped him when I took hold of his arm. “Please,” I said, “lets not argue about this. Please, let me do this. I have to do this.”

He nodded and pulled me into his arms. “I will do as you say. Promise me that you will not go through this alone. We are in this together.”

I nodded in agreement.

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Loquis found Mirra in her room. She was sitting at the table staring at the crystal in front of her.

“I do not need any more lectures, Loquis.”

“I can see you do not need one anymore.”

She turned to look at him. “Despite my feelings about her, I would never do anything that will put all of us in danger.”

“Be at ease, Mirra, we do not doubt it,” Loquis assured her. “Being a visor, it is hard to refrain one's opinions or actions to what we see in our visions.”

“Are you telling me to do the cleansing?”

“Only if you are ready and willing. Otherwise, it will not show you what you need to know.” He turned to leave, but then stopped. “What is done is done. We can not change what has passed, only learn from it. I hope the cleansing will clear your mind about Cassiea and see her for who she is. Feelings of the heart have great powers.”

She waited until he left before taking several deep breaths. She closed her eyes and started to meditate. When she felt her whole body relax, her mind cleared and at peace, she picked up her crystal and focused. A jumble of images and sounds, both from the past and future, overwhelmed her senses. She let it run through her mind before focusing in on the vision in question.

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## Chapter 10

We had been walking for a couple of days now. And within those times, Von showed me how to defend myself with the knife. Since using magic would be detected by others and hence giving our position away, to anyone who was looking for us, we had decided to wait until this was over or when we were back at their home or campground before he taught me how to use magic. While he was not instructing me on how to use the knife, we would talk about ourselves. I told him about my memories of my parents. I remembered the time when I had broken my leg and they invited all of my classmates over for a party to cheer me up. I told him about Amy, whom I met at one of the foster homes that I was in and how she was more of a sister to me than a friend. I told him about my life with Uncle Ned. How he had raised me when he found out about my parents' deaths. I told him about the time he tried to make a cake for my birthday. And, how the cake turned out a little bit burnt and lopsided.

He, in turn, told me about himself. Shuron and him were blood brothers though they hadn't always been that way. They were enemies at first, but ever since he had won the fight without using any of their magic, they became blood brothers. He and Mirra known each other for as long as he could remember. Her parents and his were good friends and they often encourage the two of them to play together when they were little. He believe both of their parent were hoping Mirra and him would come to love each other as they grow older. But, he never thought of her as anything else but a sister. Both of their parents died in the clan war. And since then, they had been looking after each other. The three of them went everywhere together and got into trouble many times when they were young. He remembered one incident when they were out in the forest, in this particular spot where we were staying for the night. He didn't know how or who started it, but they began to dare each other to swim across the river to the other side. It was forbidden for them to be here, let alone go into the river at that time. Winter had just passed and the weather was particularly warm that year. The ice and the snow had melted quickly and the river flowed fast and fierce. Shuron and he barely made it through. Mirra didn't. Shuron went in after her while he went to get help. Before he came back with the others, Shuron had managed to drag her out of the river. Everybody was relieved that they were safe.

Shuron's father, their lord, was very upset. And for a couple of months afterwards, his father took Shuron with him on his duties. For their punishment, the three of them had to do one chore for each of their people. It had taken the rest of that year for them to finish out their punishment. He told me how Loquis was like an uncle to him and Mirra after their parents died. Loquis was the one who had introduced him to spell casting. He remembered pouring over those books when he was young; trying to make up for the lack of magic that he had. That was when he found a way to bind a person's magic, which he used on Shuron so they could have a fair fight. Loquis was also the one who had suggested to their lord their punishment after the river fiasco. His theory was that the reason they were getting into constant trouble was because they had too much time on their hands and needed something to keep their minds and bodies occupied.

As I came to know him better, my feelings for him became conflicted. On one end, I loved that we were getting closer. Hearing him talk about his life and having him listen to mine, made me feel we were giving a part of ourselves to the other. It made us connected. It linked us forever because we had each other's thoughts, history, and memories. Even though we had just met, our exchange of history brought us closer together than it normally would and I relished the time we had together and the stories of his life. But on the other hand, I wished we were strangers or mere acquaintances. As we got nearer to our destination, my thoughts of what Mirra had said about Von's role in this increased—my sacrificial lamb. And I thought to myself, I may have his past, I may have him in the present, but I would never have his future. I didn't know if I could handle this. To know so much about him and yet not being able to continue to learn more. To be locked into his life, that if he was gone, a piece of me

would break and could never be repaired. He had asked me one time what Mirra and I had talked about that day—before I left on my own. I lied to him and said that I had confided in her my worries about everyone being or willing to be in harms way because of me. And how she had revealed, with a lot of convincing on my part, about the cave. In it, there was a way to break the crystal and let the magic be absorbed into me. I did not want him or anyone to blame Mirra about something that I also agreed was the best way to keep him and everybody safe. As our journey progressed, I couldn't help but feel that it was best for me to continue on my own. And so, I began to think, to plot a way to leave him behind.

The sun had not set yet when I started getting tired. We agreed to stop and camp for the night. I left to get some privacy. I didn't go far and wasn't gone long when I screamed. I could hear Von running and calling my name. As he got closer to where I was, his foot caught on something and he was lifted high off the ground into the trees where I was there waiting for him. I quickly took both of his wrist and tied them behind his back before he could realize what had just happened. He was hanging upside down, but I could still register the look of shock and hurt in his eyes. I looked away, not wanting to see it.

“What are you doing, Cass?” He asked and I could hear the anger and hurt in his voice.

“I'm sorry; I can't let you come with me. I will not let you die because of me.”

“Cut me loose now, Cassiea. You have no idea what you are getting yourself into.”

“I'll be okay. Once I have that magic within me, we wouldn't have to worry about Nara or anyone else coming after me.”

“Then let me come with you. We can do this together.”

“No. Until I get this thing done, you will always be in danger when you are with me.”

“Cassiea, look at me. Look at me, dammit!” he demanded as he struggled with his binds.

I didn't listen to him. I didn't want to see the hurt and the anger that was so apparent in his voice.

“I'm sorry.”

“Cassiea,” he called out to me as I climbed down from the tree and walked off.

I didn't tell him the whole truth about myself. I had skipped over a few parts. The first year when I lived with my uncle he noticed how timid and unobtrusive I was. It didn't help that I was shorter than most of the kids my age. To boost my confidence and my self-assurance, he had taught me a few things, in the only way he knew how. While he was backpacking around the world, he had learned a few skills while roaming the forest or living in small villages in the area. Everything that he knew, he passed down to me. And, he had taught me well. I knew how to survive in a forest if I needed to. On those camping trips we had gone on, he taught me how to hide my tracks and also how to track and hunt prey. He taught me what plants were edible and what plants to avoid. He taught me how to use his knives. Their world was a little different than what I was used to. The forest and the creatures that live in it, all have their own set of magic. During my time with Von, he had taught me what to avoid and what was safe. I knew I would be okay traveling alone. Having him around would be better, but I knew enough to get by. It would be stupid of me to think that Von wouldn't be able to get out of his binds. But I hoped I would be long gone by then. I hoped that Mirra did not tell him where the cave was. If she did, this would be a very short parting.

It was two days after I had left him that I finally made it to the cave. Now that I was here, I stood outside the entrance uncertain if I should take the next step. I knew I had to do this. I had left everything behind to get here, but there was a small part of me that hesitated. To be honest, I didn't want to go in. It was not that I wanted everyone to suffer, but because if I went in, it meant the life that I had known would be over. As absurd as it sounded, I felt that when the magic was still in the crystal, I still had hope to live a normal life that I had before I met the Elvains. With the magic in the crystal, there was still a distance, a separation between it and me. And, my responsibilities were easier to ignore—to be put away to the side. But once the magic was transferred into me, the life that I had known would end and a new life—one that I did not want—would begin. But then, the reality of it was, regardless of where that magic was, whither it is within me or contained in the crystal, it would always

be a thorn in my side.

The interior of the cave was huge. I didn't expect it to be this big; it certainly didn't look big from the outside. The size of the cave took up about one city block. I was about ten feet inside when the ground ended and dropped down to about several feet below. It wasn't difficult for me to see, since there was a sufficient light source from an opening above, so I was able to climb down easily to the bottom. There was a lot of area to cover and it didn't help that I had no idea what I was looking for. Maybe something that was out of the ordinary or out of place. Or maybe, there was a secret compartment hidden somewhere that would reveal a relic with magical powers to break the crystal. Very unlikely to be the latter, but I was in a world of magic so anything was possible. I sighed heavily and cursed at myself for not thinking to ask Mirra what this thing looked like before I set out on this trip.

I turned in a full circle while I walked, trying to figure out what this thing was in this cave when I hit my head on an invisible solid wall. A murky tinted film spread around me. I felt around and realized I was trapped in an invisible cage. Great, I thought, what am I going to do now? I pounded on the wall, hoping it would break, even though I knew it was useless. The sound of laughter echoed around me and I turned to see a woman. She looked like one of the Elvains. She had white porcelain skin. Her hair was light blond and was tied up in an elaborate braid with little tendrils flowing down her shoulders and back. There were jewels of different shapes and sizes decorating in her hair. She was dressed all in white that shimmered as she moved. Behind her, were the creatures, moricks, that I remembered during my first day here and the day at the hospital. She must be Nara and they were her minions, I realized. My hand went instinctively to the crystal around my neck and I moved back as far away from her that the cage would allow. She laughed again when she saw my retreat and walked over to me, passed the shield, which disappeared the moment she passed through, and stopped within an inch of me.

“You people are so gullible. I have you just where I wanted,” she said and then held out her hand. “Give me the crystal,” she demanded.

“No,” I said.

“You will or I will kill you.”

“You will kill me regardless, so no.”

She advanced and I retreated. Her hand shot out and I went sailing through the air and hit the wall hard before crumbling onto the floor. She was above me in an instance. Her hand shot up again and I started to scream from the pain inside me. It felt like my whole body was on fire from within and slowly bursting out.

“Give me the crystal,” she yelled.

I wanted to give in. Anything to take the pain away, but I kept reminding myself that she would kill everyone if I did. So, I just kept screaming. Then it stopped. Hands grabbed at my arms, forcing me to stand. She was displeased and I didn't know why she didn't just take it from me. But, I wasn't going to point that out to her. Behind her, two of her minions dragged a battered, bruised, and half-unconscious Von to us. I called out his name and struggled to get free so I could get to him.

“Give me the crystal or he dies,” she said and emphasized her promise by twisting her hands and Von started to scream in agony.

“Okay! Okay! I'll give it to you! Just stop hurting him!” I shouted, looking from her to Von.

She held out her hand.

“I will give it to you if you let him go.”

She twisted her hand again and Von screamed once more. “You are in no position to bargain with me.”

“Then you'll just have to kill the both of us because there is no way I am going to give you this crystal unless you agree to the deal.”

“Fine,” she said as she lowered her arm. “Give me the crystal and I will let both of you go.”

“That's not the deal.”



“I'm letting both of you go free. Isn't that a better deal?”

“I don't trust you to hold your end of the bargain once you have the crystal. We will stick to my deal.”

“You are willing to stay and die for him? How noble of you. I have a better offer. Work with me and we can each take half of everything; even my sister's magic.”

“Not interested.”

She frowned and then smiled again. She gestured to her minions and they moved to help Von to his feet and the others moved to give him space to go. I wrenched my arms out of their grasp. This time they let go and I ran to him. He took me into his arms.

“Do not give the crystal to her. She will kill us if you do.”

I moved away and just held his hand and smiled. “Good-bye, Von.”

“Cassiea—”

“Enough already,” Nara said as one of her minions pulled me back to stand beside her. She turned to Von and said, “Go before I change my mind!”

He walked off and her minions moved again to close the space.

“Now the crystal.” And then said, “a deal is a deal,” when I hesitated.

I took it off around my neck and handed it to her. She gave me a knowing smile and started to laugh. She snapped her fingers and the creatures parted again to reveal two of them holding on to Von.

“Let him go—we had a deal,” I demanded.

“I did let him go, but I never promised I would not capture him again.”

You bitch, I thought, and moved to go after her. I was stopped by the invisible cage again. She started to laugh.

“You are too much. I have not had so much fun in years. Do you really think I am going to let any of you go?” she said to me and then shot out her arm. A white light came out of her hand and hit Von. He fell to the ground.

“No!” I cried as I banged on the invisible cage, desperate to get free, to get to Von. But, it was of no use. I twisted around to face her. “I'm going to kill you.”

She sighed and said, “Promises. Promises.”

With the wave of her arms, she let me go. I was running to Von when one of her minions caught me and held me in place. She walked over to me and said, “I think I will watch you suffer first before I kill you.”

She held the crystal at eye level and then frowned. She looked even closer and her frown turned to anger. She screamed, threw the crystal against the wall where it broke into a million pieces, and then backhanded me on my cheeks.

“Where is it!” she demanded. “Where is the crystal that holds my sister's magic!”

On the ground, I looked up at her and laughed. “You can't seriously believe that I am that stupid to think this wasn't a trap, do you?”

I laughed at her again. But to myself, I thanked God that I had had the foresight to hide it. When I was on my own in the forest, I hid the magic in case anyone found me and killed me for it. I knew I would be able to call to it and it would appear in my hands, as Loquis had demonstrated that first day when I met all of them for the first time.

## Chapter 11

She was furious. A rock exploded at a distance and her minions stepped back to avoid her anger. She grabbed hold of my throat and pulled me up. I was choking and tried to loosen her grip, but she was really strong.

“Where is the crystal?” she said, emphasizing each word.

Suddenly screams filled the air all around us. Von was alive and had killed all of her minions. While she was distracted, I took out my knife and stabbed her. She was more angry than in pain and flung me to the other side. I would have hit the wall if Von hadn't appeared and slowed down my speed until I was floating into his arms. He set me down. Before, when I said good-bye to him, I had slipped him the crystal with the magic in it. I was hoping he would be able to use it and if he couldn't, at least the Elvains would have the magic. Now, when I looked at him, happy to know that he was alive, I wondered if it was the magic in the crystal that revived him. I also noticed a difference in him. He seemed aloof; cold and sinister. He did not respond when I called his name. He let go of me and walked away. A wall went up around me when I tried to go after him. I banged on it and called out his name, but he ignored me. He kept walking to where Nara was. She stepped back with fear in her eyes as Von moved forward. She waved her hand and a dozen of her minions appeared in front of her. They charged at him. Without missing a step or even looking at them, they burst into flames.

He and Nara started to fight. I could feel the walls of the caves trembling, dust fell and small rocks tumbled down to the ground because of them. Several openings appeared near the walls of the cave and Shuron and a couple of scouts stepped through. When Nara saw them, she placed a shield around herself. While Von was trying to break it down, she created an opening. She was about to step into it when Von broke the shield and flung her several feet away. At the other side of the opening, her minions saw that she was in danger and came charging through. Von glanced their way, then turned and walked over to where Nara was, as if their presence was too insignificant to him to bother with. Shuron motioned the scouts and they moved to attack the minions. He went over to me, placed his hand on the invisible wall, and concentrated. The whole place started to shake, huge rocks fell, dust flew everywhere and the uneven ground started to break apart. Everyone was dodging the falling rocks and the gaps in the floor while they fought. Only Von and Nara did not notice the devastation around them—their only focus was on killing one another.

“We need to leave now—the cave is collapsing,” Shuron said to me when he broke the cage I was in.

He then lifted his arms and a small bright light shot through the air before bursting. The scouts saw the sign and started to retreat. They made several openings and went through. The ones that were closest to us converged to surround us and fought the minions that were left. Shuron made an opening and one by one the rest of them went through. I didn't want to go without Von. I called out to him, but he was either too far away to hear me or didn't want to listen.

“We need to get Von,” I said to him and started to move, but he stopped me.

“It's too late—the cave is collapsing, there is not enough time. We have to go now.”

He was right, but I didn't care. All I could think about was getting to Von. I pulled away and ran to him while calling his name. Shuron was quicker. He grabbed me and forced me through the opening. It led us a mile away from the cave. I watched, in horror, as the cave began to fold within itself. I couldn't believe what was happening. I freed myself from his grasp and ran towards the ruins; all the while telling myself that he was still alive. He has to be alive. He couldn't be dead.” I wiped at the tears that were streaming down my face as I climbed to the top. Then I started moving pieces of the rubble, not caring that it was impossible for anyone to still be alive. The others stood a short distance away with somber eyes watching me as I moved one stone after another. Slowly, Shuron came over to me and

knelt down beside me.

“Please,” I begged him. “Please help me. He can't be dead. We need to find him.”

Gently he took my hands into his and said, “I am sorry, Cassiea.”

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “No!”

He gathered me into his arms and let me weep. After a while, he said that we needed to go.

Without a protest, I let him help me to my feet and let him support me as we walked away. The ground was uneven and I would have slipped if he hadn't been holding on to me. Several rocks moved and tumbled down, then the ground began to shake. He lightly pushed me forward and told me to run. I had only taken a few steps when a hand shot out from the rubble and grabbed my ankle. I fell and I could hear Shuron shouting my name as I was dragged under.

When I came to, I was on the floor, lying on my back. My body felt like it had broken into millions of pieces and my head had gone through the blender. My eyes were unfocused and I was seeing two of everything. I groaned in pain as I moved my head slightly to see that I was in a small cave. Several feet above me was an opening that I assumed was where I had fallen from. A shadow crossed over me and Nara appeared in my line of vision. She was still alive; furious and crazed. She was dusty all over, some of her hair was pulled out from her braid, her clothes were torn and there were slashes of blood everywhere on her body. She lifted an arm and my eyes widened in horror at the knife she was holding. I couldn't move as she stabbed several times while yelling and raving on about how it was all my fault. How I had ruined everything and I was going to pay for it. I screamed each time the blade went into my body, then after a while I couldn't feel anything. There was a numbness that spread over me and I felt a weightlessness as if I were floating an inch above the floor where I lay as I watched the upward and downward motion of her arm. She then grabbed a fistful of my hair and tilted my head back exposing my neck.

The knife had just nicked my skin when she started to scream in agony. She arched back, letting go of my hair and the knife. I could see a faint light appearing in the middle of her chest. It then grew bigger and brighter. Slowly a faint outline of a hand started to appear and grabbed hold of the light before it pulled back. The light started to dim until it disappeared. I looked up to see her face frozen in fear. She fell sideways to reveal Von behind her. His face was expressionless as he looked at me. In his hand, he held a glowing object. He moved it closer to his chest and pressed it into him until it disappeared. I whispered his name, so glad that he was still alive. He leaned down and placed the palm of his hand on my chest. My whole body started to ache with pain once more. Then a warm tingling sensation took over before it subsided. I moved slightly and didn't feel any pain. I noticed the cuts, the bruises, and the stab wounds were gone. He was about to lift me into his arms when someone called out his name. We both turned to see Shuron standing there with the other scouts. Von got up to go to him, then stopped and turned to see one of the scouts had lifted me into his arms. Within a blink of an eye, we appeared next to Shuron.

“She is mine. Let her go,” Von commanded.

“I can not do that.”

I stepped forward and was blocked by an arm from the scout who was next to me. Suddenly, he was pushed away from me and landed hard on the ground some distance away. Shuron stepped in front of me and held out a crystal. He started to chant before he was pulled forward to where Von stood. Von grabbed a fistful of his shirt and punched him in the jaw. Shuron went down, but quickly got up and lunged at him. They started to fight. All of us looked on as they either used their magic or their physical strength to fight each other. I overheard one of the scout saying to the other that there was no competition, Shuron was no match for Von since he absorbed all of Keya's magic. I looked from one to the other and realized that the scout was right. Von looked like he was just toying with him and Shuron was trying hard not to get killed. I knew I had to do something to stop this. I ran to Von shouting his name, telling him to stop. The scout who was next to me went after me. We were struggling when Von saw us and the next thing I knew, the scout burst into flames.

I screamed and stood there frozen in place, horrified by the pile of ashes next to me. Shuron and Von started to fight again. Then everyone started to attack. But, it was useless. One by one I watched them perishing in flames. And all I could do was stand there, horrified. I kept repeating over and over again for them to stop, to stop fighting, it was all over, she was dead, but no one would listen. They all perished into flames until there was only the three of us was left. Shuron was lying on the ground unconscious. Von lifted his arm and was about to strike when I finally was able to make my body move. I ran, covered Shuron with my body and got hit instead of him.

I was in and out of consciousness, my head pounded and my back felt like it was on fire. My ears were ringing and I heard a muffled voice next to me. I forced my eyes to open to see Von beside me. He gently lifted me into a sitting position and moved me until my back was supported by the wall of the cave. He looked normal again, like his old self. He said my name again. When I was able to speak, I begged him not to fight anymore. It was all over. Nara was gone and he didn't need to fight anymore. He looked around him and saw the devastation. He whispered Shuron's name when he saw his unconscious body. He turned to me and I could see the horror in his eyes.

“What have I done?” he said with such pain and agony in his voice. “I am—”

I touched my fingers to his lips to silence him. “This isn't your fault. None of it is your fault,” I said to him and to myself, I said that the fault was mine. I should never have left on my own in the first place. All I wanted was to keep everyone safe and look at what I had done. I wanted to beg him for his forgiveness at what I made him do, but I was too ashamed to say the words.

He shook his head and looked away. “No, this is my fault. I should have protected you better.”  
“Von—”

He kissed me lightly on the lips. “Everything will be all right; I know what I have to do.”

A knife appeared in his hand. He grabbed hold of my hand and placed the handle into it. I was confused and tried to let go, but he held my hand tightly. He looked at me then and I looked at him with pleading eyes, not knowing what he was going to do, though I knew it wasn't going to be anything good.

“I love you, Cass. Always have and always will. Forgive me,” he said and plunged the knife into his chest.

I screamed, trying to pull my hand away, but with his hand over mine, it wouldn't budge. I cried as I yelled at him to stop, to let go. He would not move. Instead, he pushed it in even further and twisted. I screamed his name as he slumped over me. His hand loosened and I was finally able to let go of the knife, but it was too late. I moved him so his head would rest on my lap. I was shaking all over and sobbing. I pulled the knife out, threw it as far as I could, and placed my palm on the wound to stop the flow of blood. My hands were shaking when I touched his neck to try to feel for a pulse. Nothing. Calmly, I shook him and said his name, telling him to wake up. I begged him to please wake up. I knew I wasn't making any sense, but I couldn't help myself. Even though I knew he was gone, I still hoped. I still wanted to believe that it wasn't over. So I yelled, pleading with him to move, to open his eyes. I was startled when the center of his chest started to glow. First it was just a dim light, then it started to grow. It grew until it burst into a blinding light. I covered my eyes from the glare. Suddenly, I was hit in the chest. It hit me so hard and pressed me against the wall that I screamed in agony. It kept increasing. The pressure was so great that I felt the wall behind me breaking apart and I could hardly move or breathe. Then everything went dark.

I dreamed that I was back at the campsite, in a room. I got up and walked out. It was late morning and I could see a few people moving around. Some noticed me and smiled while others looked concerned. They all said something to me, but I couldn't hear them. One looked my way, turned and ran in the other direction. I was entering a room and the first thing I saw was a person's back. He turned and I realized it was Loquis. He smiled and walked over to me. He placed both hands on each side of my shoulders and looked into my eyes as if searching for something.

“Cassiea, none of this is your fault. Promise me that you will remember. None of it is your fault,”

he said to me.

I wanted to reply, but no words came out. As hard as I tried, I couldn't make a sound. Suddenly, his eyes grew big; wide with shock and pain. His mouth opened as if to scream in agony, though no sound came through. There was a bright light and he slowly crumbled to the floor. I screamed, calling out his name, but I could only hear silence. My body stood still as a statue while my mind was in turmoil at what I had done and my frantic push to move my body to help him. But, I stood there over his body as he lay with his eyes wide open. I turned around and saw Mirra barging in through the door. My arms lifted and she was flung to her right. I went over, knelt beside her. She was saying something to me, but I couldn't hear. I couldn't hear anything. Her eyes widened and I could see a glowing bright light.

Then a sharp pain stabbed at my chest. I looked behind me to see Shuron holding a necklace with a crystal attached to it. He held it out as his mouth moved, though no sound came through. I could feel the pain in my chest growing worse by the minute. It felt like someone was ripping my heart out. As I tried to lift my hand up, I felt another sharp pain, this time at the back of my head. The world went dark once again.

I woke up in a daze. My head pounded like someone took a hammer and used it to hit the back of my head over and over again. Groggily, I slowly got up, wincing and moaning in pain at each move I made. There was a clatter of something breaking. I turned and saw a glimpse of someone running off. I regretted the movement as a sharp pain stabbed at my head and quickly went down to my spine. I fell back on the bed moaning. I could hear someone coming in and then placing a hand on top of my forehead. Within seconds, my pain lessened.

"You are finally awake," a male voice said. "Do not move or the pain will come back again," he warned when I tried to get up. "You need to stay still and rest."

"Where am I?" I asked. He sounded so familiar. I tried to open my eyes to see who it was, but I was so groggy and I was slipping in and out of consciousness.

"You are at Alyntia."

"Alyntia, what the heck is that?" I didn't realize that I said it out loud until I heard his soft chuckle.

"It is the name of our home."

"What happened?" I asked. "What am I doing here? Who are you?"

He chuckled again and said, "You have been through quite an ordeal. You should rest now."

"I have to go."

"Stay for now," he whispered. "You are safe," I heard him say before I fell asleep.

The next time I woke up, Shuron was there at my bed side. I felt much better though sore all over. He told me what happened that day in the cave. He could only guess—and I confirmed—that I had given the crystal to Von and he had absorbed all of the magic within himself. As they had suspected, it turned him evil. The reason why the crystal's magic had quickly took over, turning him evil, instead of it being a gradual process, was because of his level of magic and because he was weak; almost at death's door. None of them realized until later that Von had transferred it all into me. Mirra and a few others had come into the cave to find Shuron and me unconscious and Von dead. When we were back at their home, he and Mirra heard that I was awake and was walking to Loquis' court. Mirra went after me and by the time she got there, I had killed Loquis. I was about to kill Mirra too when he came in. While he was distracting me, Mirra hit me over the head. As I lay unconscious, he was able to transfer the magic back into the crystal.

"Do not blame yourself for Loquis' death, Cassiea. You were not in control when the magic was within you, just like Von was not to blame for the deaths of the scouts. The magic turns even the purest heart evil."

"But, I thought I could control it. I thought I was immune to it. Isn't that what all of you told me? Isn't that why I was to hold on to it?"

"We know very little about this magic, but what we said is true. Over time you will be able to change it. In this circumstance, it was placed within you at a moment when you were at your weakest."

It took over your body and mind before you were ready to understand how to use it and how to control it.”

He took the box that was on the table next to him and walked over to me to place it on my lap. Before he left, I asked him why Nara didn't just kill me to get the crystal instead of forcing me into giving it to her. He explained that there were two ways to take control of the magic away from the master. One was to kill me, the master, and the other was for me to relinquish the magic to her. Nara knew she would never be able to kill me because the magic would instinctively protect me. By handing the magic over to her, I willingly surrendered it and therefor gave the control of it to her.

It was an hour after he left when I forced myself to acknowledge the box. I knew what it was. I didn't want it and was tempted to throw it away. Unfortunately, I couldn't. Opening the box, I took out the necklace that held the crystal with Keya's magic and placed it around my neck.

The sun was setting the next day when the ceremony began. There were globes of glowing lights that floated above everyone. They all dressed in somber colors and the atmosphere was filled with sorrow and grief. Everyone gathered at the main thoroughfare that all of their corts had been built around. There was a big ancient tree at the center. Shuron stood, with his back to the trunk of the tree, on top of a platform between Von's and Loquis' body. Several jars were placed in front of him. He said something in a language that I couldn't understand. Everyone bowed their heads as if in prayer. When he was done, a couple of them moved to carry the bodies and the jars down to the edge of town while the others trailed behind. I was the last to follow. There, they had built a mount with twigs and branches. They carried the bodies to the top and laid one next to the other. Shuron held out his hand and the bottom of the mount lit up. The flames spread quickly. I watched at a distance and said a silent prayer to them.

## Chapter 12

I did not know how long I stood there watching the flames. But, night had fallen and the moon was out. I wondered, where did the Elvains go when they died? Did they also have a God or some form of deity that they worshiped? Did they have a heaven or an afterlife that they went to when they passed away? As I thought of these questions, Mirra walked over to me and stood beside me. We were quiet for a while before she turned to me. She looked down on the ground first before lifting her head and looked straight into my eyes.

“I want to apologize. I was jealous of you and Von together. I am sorry if I caused you any grief because of it. And, the vision that I had of the cave—”

I held her hand to stop her. “You loved him. I understand. You did everything, just as I have. Lets forget about the past and start over. I want us to be friends.”

She wanted to say more, but nodded instead. “I would like that. Thank you, Cassiea.” She looked at the flames for a few more seconds before she left.

I stood there a little bit longer before turning to go as well. I stopped when I heard a faint sound of music playing in the air. It sounded like a flute and the melody lightened my heart. It pulled me forward and I followed the tune. I was up on a cliff when the music stopped. I walked over to the edge and looked down at the top of their courts. I could see the fire still burning. My eyes watered as I pictured Von and Loquis in my mind. A slight movement caught my eyes and I looked to see the man who had rescued me in the forest. He was holding a flute in his hand.

“You should be resting,” he said by way of greeting.

I did not reply, just looked at him as he approached me. He still disturbed me and I still didn't know why. As I watched him, my stomach tightened and my heart skipped a beat. It was discomfoting and disturbing. I couldn't look at him anymore so I turned and watched the fire burn.

“How long do you think the fire will last?” I asked.

“The flames are created by magic. It will stay burning for a couple more days.”

“Why do you do that?”

“This is the way we honor our dead. It is said that the smoke guides the soul to the heavens. We let the flames burn for a few days to help the souls on their way. Also it is for our people, the ones who are not here will be able to see the smoke and give their peace to them.”

After several minutes of silence, he spoke again.

“Cass—”

“Don't,” I turned to him and said before he could finish. “Don't tell me that their deaths and the others were not my fault. It doesn't help. It doesn't take away the guilt or the pain.”

“I was going to say if you need a shoulder to cry on, mine is available.”

“I'm fine.”

“Cass, you have been through a lot in a short period of time. It is more than anyone could take. Though we have only met once, briefly, try not to think of me as a stranger, or a man for that matter. Think of me as someone that you can lean on for support or comfort.”

“Like Mr. Blinky,” I said softly .

He frowned in confusion. “Mr.—blinky?”

My face turned red. I did not realize I said it out loud. “When I was really, realllly very young I had this yellow blanket. I don't know why but it was always my favorite. When I was sad, scared, or upset I would hold on to the blanket. It always made me feel better.”

His lips twitched. “Yes, like Mr. Blinky. Use me as someone you can hold on to, to make you feel better; or, I can have someone retrieve that blanket for you.”

“I don't have it anymore. It is gone, along with my parents in the car accident.”

“I am sorry.”

“It was all my fault. We were coming back from a trip. A drunk driver had rammed us from behind. My father had lost control of the car and the car started to spin. It got turned over, but we were safe. We got out of there alive. When I realized that my blanket was still in the car, I wanted to go get it. My father wouldn't let me. I was such a stubborn kid. I kept begging him and begging him about that stupid blanket. He had finally given in and promised to go back if I stayed right where I was. He was coming back when there was an explosion. Something hit him and he went down. I heard my mom scream and she started to run to him. I ran after her calling to them when there was another explosion. The next thing I could remember, I was in a hospital and my parents were dead.”

“Herina,” he whispered before he wrapped me into his arms. When he felt me stiffen, he held on tighter. “Stay,” he softly said to me. “Stay even if it is just for a moment. Forget about who we are or what we are. Just be with me and hold on to me. Let me comfort you at least for a little while.”

I burst into tears and clung to him, crying in his arms for a very long time until I was all dried up. Then I moved away. I had never told anyone about what happened that day when my parents died. I didn't know why I told him. Maybe I wanted him to be repulsed by what I did and he would stay far away from me. Or maybe, I needed to tell someone, to confess all of my sins. The police had asked me what happened that day, the shrinks also, and so did the social workers, but I didn't say a word. I didn't speak for a very long time. I was so ashamed of what I did. So afraid of what people would do to me if they knew that I had killed them. I was such a coward. A selfish coward. I have so much to repent for. I have caused so much death.

“Thank you.”

“Any time. I will always be here for you. That's a promise.”

He left me alone to grieve privately. I was grateful for everything he had done. Not only had he saved my life, but he had comforted me when I needed it. I was grateful that he didn't try to console with me, telling me that it wasn't my fault when we both knew that it was. Whoever he was, I hoped that I would never see him again. I was so afraid that he would end up like the others, dead at my hands.

A week later, after the healer had pronounced me healed, I set out for my home. Shuron said that I was welcome in their home. There was always a place for me there if I chose to stay. But, I couldn't. I couldn't live there each day knowing that I had caused them to lose friends and loved one. I couldn't stand to see their accusing faces staring at me. Shuron had told me on several occasions that what happened wasn't my fault and not to blame myself for it. But, it was my fault and no one could tell me otherwise. For the week that I was recovering, I stayed in my room. I was grateful that no one disturbed me. The only person that I saw was Shuron and I didn't have the heart to tell him to go away. To see him, was to remind me of Von and the stories he had told of the two of them.

During one of his visits he told me that Wolrik had arranged my uncle's burial. I was out in the forest with Von and couldn't be contacted. He apologized for not making the arrangements himself, but at the time, he was trying to gather some reinforcements to go after us. That just made me burst into tears and I was thankful that he knew I needed to be alone. The first thing I did when I was back was to visit my parents' graves then my uncle's. The apartment that we lived in was in a hotel. He was the super there and part of his job was to be on call at a moment's notice, so they had provided a place in the hotel for him to live. He was able to haggle them into giving us a two-bedroom instead of a one-bedroom, as stated in the contract.

When I got to the hotel, I was distressed to find that our belongings had already been packed and shipped. He gave me an address where I could retrieve them. When I got there, it was a building with a bar on the ground floor with apartments above it. The bartender was an Elvain. She said she was expecting me and led me to one of the apartments upstairs. Before she went back down, she handed me a note from Shuron. He wrote that the apartment was mine. Tirena, the owner of the bar and building, would give me a job in her bar if I wanted it. But if I chose to go on my own, I should consider this



place as a temporary residence until I found something more permanent. And no matter what I decided, there was a home back in Edeon waiting for me. I was part of their family whether or not I accepted it. He also wrote that Tirena would help me learn to control and use my magic. She would be my instructor until I was ready to accept a mentor of my own. At the doorway, I looked inside and realized it was in the exact layout of the apartment I shared with my uncle at the hotel. Even the furniture and everything that we had in it, was in the same position. Everything the same, but not the same. A home that was not a home. I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and closed the door.

Dear Readers,

I hope you enjoyed reading this ebook as much as I enjoyed writing it. Although I never majored or minored in English literature or had any serious thoughts to writing, I couldn't help but create a world where Cassiea and the Elvains lived. Their story had been playing in my thoughts and my dreams for years. I knew if I didn't write it down, I'll never get any peace. So here it is, there story of how they came to be and there are many more I want to tell. If reading this ebook peaked your interest into these characters, you can read more about them and their adventures in my second ebook called "Preina." Here is a sneak peak of chapter one.

## Preina

### Chapter 1

This was my life. I ran around in the rain, in storms or in stifling heat—in any weather, day or night, chasing after magical or mythical creatures. Sometimes, in situations like this, our roles were reversed. I was heaving and gasping for air. My lungs were about to burst and a stab of pain kept jabbing at the left side of my waist as I ran like hell away from a humongous beast I called Stampy. I named him that because when he charged at you, he sounded like thousands of legs stomping on the ground, gunning your way. Stampy was getting closer by the minute and I could hear him growling and the rapid thump, thump, thump, thump of the his's paws hitting the rooftop floor getting louder and louder. With each gulp of air, I thought to myself that I seriously needed to spend more time on my cardio. Finally, the neighboring rooftop, where I was to make my last stand, was within reach. I used what little energy I had and sprinted. At the final moment, I jumped. Then I screamed. My eyes widened in horror. I wasn't going to make it.

I shot out my arms, clawing at the air, hungrily stretching myself as far as possible to grab on to anything. When I finally felt my fingers hit something solid, I held on to it for dear life. Then, my whole body hit the wall with a big, loud bang, which loosened my grip on the ledge. My left shoulders wrenched at the sudden weight of my whole body and I could feel the fingers on my left hand starting to slip. I quickly swung my right arm over and clamped my hand onto the rooftop ledge. I groaned in pain and laughed at myself for my sheer dumb luck. I made it—just barely. I scrambled, using my arms and legs to climb up when a shadow crossed over me. I quickened my pace. I had just gotten my arms on the ledge when Stampy landed, pivoted and was charging right at me. Cursing, I leaned and placed all of my weight on my left arm and shoulder while lifting my right hand out towards him. With my palms out and fingers spread wide, I closed my eyes and concentrated on using magic to push Stampy away from me. Hearing a cry, I opened my eyes to see him flying in the air. Then I concentrated again and slowly a line appeared and glowed but quickly it faded away.

"Damn!"

I closed my eyes to focus. When I opened them, I saw the glowing line flicker several times. A movement distracted me. Stampy was charging again. I moved my arm, creating a small ball of electricity and shoot. Stampy went down. He made a small whine before he went still. But only for a moment. He twitched several times before the legs started to move. Quickly, I went back to create an opening. Once again the glowing line appeared then winked out.

“Come on. Come on. Work.” I said under my breath.

There was no time. I could see Stampy struggling to get up. Beads of sweat rolled down my face. My temperature rose as the adrenaline and fear rushed through my body. Concentrating even harder, a line appeared again. The glow was weak and translucent before it slowly gain strength and clarity. Then it grew wider until an opening appeared. We were surrounded by the city landscape, on top of a roof, over looking other rooftops. And in the middle of it all, was an opening, with a view of the ground full of dirt, grass, trees, and everything else that made up a forest. Stampy was up and full of rage. It bared its teeth and snarled as it charged towards me. With all my might I pushed the creature into the opening and watched as Stampy and the opening disappeared. I heaved a sigh of relief when it was all over.

Usually, this action wouldn't be so difficult since I had been practicing using magic for a year now and was fairly good at this maneuver. But I was tired—hanging on a ledge and trying to keep myself from falling ten stories down. It took most of my concentration and energy, so I had very little to spare on creating an opening and making sure Stampy went through it before it harmed or killed me. Never again would I put myself through this. There had to be a better way. I groaned at the sound of thunder echoing across the sky. I had been working since late last night and now dawn was breaking through the horizon, accompanied by a storm. Still dangling from the ledge, I released a heavy sigh of resignation and rested my head on my arm. I wonder what else could go wrong. When I became aware that I was no longer alone, I opened my eyes to see Xena's face an inch from mine. Her real name was Tirena, but she liked to be called Xena here in our world. She was from a race called the Elvain and she was helping me to control and use this magic.

It had all started when I found a necklace that had a crystal attached to it. Inside this crystal held the magic of an evil witch named Keya who was killed long ago. To my utter disbelief, I discovered that I was the reincarnation of Keya and the magic within the crystal was mine. Not only was I shocked to learn that there were such things as real magic and that I had magic of my own, but that the Elvains had been living among us for centuries. Xena's main job or duty was to provide shelter and help for her people that lived in our world. She had been here for years and knew a lot about our world. She owned the building where I lived and also the bar down stairs where I occasionally worked.

The Elvain were from another part of earth called Edeon. Many centuries ago, humans and Elvains had once lived together in peace until one day there was a disagreement, which led to a war. The war lasted so long and cost so many lives that the king of the Elvain decided that in order to end the suffering and to prevent another war it was best if they lived separately from us humans. Using magic, he hid a portion of the earth from us. The best way that I could describe it was if you think of the earth as being a long string and move its two center points together, what you would have was a long continuous line with a closed loop at the center. The loop's area was where the Elvains lived and the long continuous line was where we lived—not knowing that there was an extra piece of earth hidden from us. The magic made it so that if anyone walked past the hidden area or the invisible wall between the Elvain's world and ours, they would automatically be on the other side of our world without knowing that Edeon was between it.

Since it was a very difficult and took a lot of magic and energy to create it, they used an opal, which—for this purpose—served as a battery that stored tons of magic to keep the invisible wall operating. It was hard to maintain the wall and sometimes holes would appear in it. If a person stepped through one of these holes, they would walk into the Elvain's world and leave ours. The Elvain had people who took care of those “lost ones,” as they liked to call them, and brought them back here with their memories of ever having been in Edeon completely erased. Sometimes creatures from the Elvain's world would get caught in our world and had to be trapped and sent back before they could cause any harm to the people who lived here.

Since I had decided to stay here instead of Edeon, Xena and some of the other Elvains were training me in how to capture these creatures and take them back to their world. This was usually done alone, but since I was a trainee, I always had one or two people accompanying me. Tonight—or I

should say last night, since it was already morning—was my final training. Last night was my test to determine if I was able to go patrolling or, to use their term, “hunting,” without any help. On my own, I had to find a creature, lure it up to the rooftop and then send it back to where it belonged. The more experienced hunters were able to trap them anywhere without a problem. Since I wasn’t even close to being an average hunter, I had to lure a creature to the rooftop before sending it back. The reason for this was that most of these creatures who ended up here had magic of their own. When they were scared or frightened by someone trying to grab them, they became hostile and wreaked havoc on everything around them in order to get away. Luring them to the rooftop was the easiest way to prevent any harm to anyone who was around the area. It also reduced the damages to properties.

Another reason for beginners like me to use the rooftop was because there was less chance of someone seeing us. Very few people gathered or spent time on the roof and hardly anyone looked out their windows. Discretion was the top priority. Hunting at night was also an easy way of going unnoticed. There were fewer people walking about and most windows were closed with the drapes drawn. But I have to say, hunting at night was not easy. There were too many shadows for creatures to hide in and it was hard to see in the dark. Because of the poor visibility, I almost tripped a couple of times over an object or was nearly killed by a creature that hid in the shadows. It was also hard to measure the distance if one was planning on jumping from one rooftop to the next. Hence, the reason I was dangling on the ledge trying hard not to fall off.

It took me a couple of tries before I finally got my whole body onto the roof. I lay on my back, breathing heavily and drenched in sweat. I felt, and possibly looked, like I had just swum a ten-mile lap. Xena stood there looking down at me with a frown. She then shook her head while making a tsk, tsk sound.

“Pathetic. Just pathetic,” she said.

“Hey, I got that thing back, didn’t I?” I replied.

“Yes, you did. I just don’t understand why it took you so long to do so. There were plenty of times when you could have sent it back, but you didn’t.”

My eyes widened and I started to sputter before I could get my words out.

“But, but, you told me to bring it back here. Right here,” I said while slapping the roof several times for emphasis.

“True, but I also said, ‘If you need to, improvise.’ Look at you, lying here as if you were dead to the world. You spent all of that unnecessary energy and for what? To bring one creature here?”

“Isn’t that the idea?”

“No. The idea was to find the creature and get it back to Edeon using the least amount of energy and magic possible. You totally drained yourself for one puny creature. What would have happened if there were another one or maybe two more waiting for you right here? You would be dead!”

I lifted myself up on my elbows. “You told me to first find the creature at point ‘A’ and bring it here to point ‘B,’ where I was to send it back to your world. Secondly, you told me that this spot, point ‘B,’ is where the training will end. And thirdly that creature was not puny. It was as huge as a rhinoceros.”

“I said that you have to get a creature back home from point ‘A’ to point ‘B’ which means you have that much of a distance to get the creature back. Not find it at point ‘A’ and bring it to point ‘B’ to send it back. I then said that point ‘B’ is the end of the training. Which means, if you have not gotten the creature back by then, you failed. The end. Thirdly, I wasn’t talking about the size. I was talking about its magic level, which by the way is zero. Puny.”

“Magic level” was how the Elvains measured their magical powers. One was the lowest range of magic while five was the highest. Both level one and five were the rarest. If you think of it in terms of playing the piano, five was someone like Mozart and one was an average common person who could play well. Having a level zero meant a person was tone deaf, someone with no musical talent. In this case, that person had no magic at all. Xena had told me that she was a level two. And I, well, no one

really knew. That was because Keya had stolen so much magic from others to increase her own magic level to an unnatural state. No one knew how many she had taken except that her magic level was higher than a five. Since I inherited her magic—unwillingly—I have more power than any of the Elvains. But since I had acquired this new ability in such a short period of time and was still a novice, it seemed I had a magic level of a one instead of a level greater than five.

I fell back down, too tired to argue any further. I just waved my hand back and forth between the two of us while telling her that we needed to work on our communications skills. After shaking her head once more, she left. Massive clouds started to form above me and darken the sky. Then flashes of lightning started to appear along with roars of thunder so loud and resounding that they shook the asphalt floor of the rooftop where I lay. I groaned again, knowing I wasn't going to make it back in time before it started pouring.

I was one rooftop away from home when I saw a figure on my fire escape, peering into my window. He was holding something in his hand and almost dropped it when I called out to him. He started to run up the stairs. I chased after him, wanting to know what he was doing at my window. Despite his short stumpy legs, he was very fast and agile. I had a very hard time catching up to him. When I was about a foot away, I tripped over something that was left on the rooftop and landed flat on my face. Groaning, I rolled to my back and once again faced the dark sky that reflected my mood so well. I was upset and exhausted without the strength or tenacity to go after him. So, I just lay on my back trying to catch my breath.

Suddenly, a head popped right in front of my line of vision. It was that person, or actually that creature, that I had chased from my fire escape. This creature was different from the others that I had seen before. Most of them had animalistic features. For instance, they ran or walked on all fours with paws for feet. He had more humanistic features like big, round, dark frontal eyes. There were small patches of short, black, spiky hair on top of his head. His ears were like ours, though slightly larger and they stuck out from his head. His arms were long and gangly and he was dressed in a white button-down shirt, two sizes too big, and suspenders that held up his pants. In his hands, he held a bowl with a goldfish swimming inside. I was so shocked to see him right in front of me that all I could do was lay there with my mouth agape. He started to garble something incomprehensible to me before placing the bowl on top of my stomach. My hands instinctively held on to it. Then he was gone. He didn't disappear but moved so fast that when I turned my head to the side, he was already on the other side of this roof ready to jump onto the next one. And at that moment, rain began to pour down sending a bunch of tiny jabs to my body. I was lying on the roof with my face up to the sky trying to ignore the rain, the thunder, and the lightning while thinking that a year of this was enough. It was time to move on.

I entered my apartment through the fire escape window. My apartment building had no street entrance. If I wanted to enter through my front door, I had to go through the bar, the kitchen and then to the side stairs. Usually when I wanted a drink or some company that was what I would do. But today I just wanted to be alone. I glanced at the sofa before going into the kitchen and placed the fish bowl on the counter. I took out two beers from the fridge and sat down on a chair next to the sofa. I then placed one unopened beer down on the coffee table and gulped down the other.

"You will catch your death in those wet clothes."

I looked over at the man sitting on the sofa next to me. Pale blue eyes, blond and tall, he looked like, as he always did, a reserved authoritative Greek god. When I first met him, he was the leader of the AulTar clan. A year later, he took over his father's position as the Lord of the Elvain.

"Hello, Shuron nice to see you too," I said.

"My apologies, Cassiea. How are you?" he asked.

"Wet, but good."

I excused myself and went to the bathroom to change. When I came out, he was facing the window

watching the storm. I noticed that he was holding the beer in his hand. Something must have been troubling him since he never drank anything I offered before. Lightning flashed several times through the sky and brightened the room, making me realize that I never bothered to turn the lights on when I got in. He did not seem to be aware or bothered by the dark. With a wave of my hand, I used magic to turn the lights on while I walked over to where he stood. He turned to me and I could see, as I had guessed, he was troubled, as if he were pondering something and unsure of what to do. Instead of telling me what was on his mind, he turned and looked around the room.

I turned to look too. We were standing with the window behind us and the sofa facing us. To our left was a round table and next to it, was an open kitchen with a counter where the fish bowl sat and three bar stools. Then the front door, which was straight in front of us. Then the bathroom. And last, on our right was my bed. My place had once been a one-bedroom apartment. Now, it was one big studio. One of my first tests using magic, after numerous practicing and teaching sessions from Xena, was to change the layout of my apartment to suit my tastes. Suffice it to say, it hadn't gone well. I had ended up exploding the wall between the bedroom and the rest of the living area. When the smoke had cleared and the fire had been put out, I had decided I liked the spaciousness and told her I was finished. She had not been pleased and made me clean up the mess using only magic.

"Xena and I had a discussion about you in regards to your magic. She informed me that you did not succeed in passing your test."

I bit my tongue to keep myself from saying anything. I was not going to apologize or make excuses for our mis-understanding of the rules.

He turned to me and looked at the crystal tied around my neck that held the magic. "Your magic should have absorbed into you by now."

I looked down and held the crystal between my fingers. As it had done many times before, when I moved it around, the crystal became murky and several round, bright lights of different sizes and colors appeared and swirled around until it slowly faded away. When I first learned about the Elvains and this magic, they had said that it would eventually be absorbed into me. A year ago it did happen and the magic had turned me evil. Fortunately, Shuron had been able to place it back into the crystal, but not before I had killed someone. Since then, I wasn't too eager to have all this magic inside me. They had assured me that what had happened would not happen again. But I wasn't going to take any chances and kept the magic contained within the crystal. When I needed to use it, I would absorb just enough to use and when I was done, I would place it back into the crystal.

"Is that why you are here?" I asked.

"No, Cassiea. I am just concerned. As long as your magic is still in this crystal, you will be in danger. Many magical beings have been and will be tempted to kill you for it."

"I know. Xena has reminded me on numerous occasions and I have been attacked a couple of times, but I was able to come out of it alive."

He was surprised by my last remark. "Why was I not aware of these attacks?"

I shrugged. "I didn't want to worry anyone," I said. "Xena has showed me some basic defense and I have been working with her to prepare myself."

"She told me about your training but we have people looking after you when you are outside. They have not informed me about these attacks."

"Yeah. About that," I said with a little guilt in my voice. "I've been sneaking away from them for quite some time now."

He was surprised, then upset, and said, "You should not have done so. They are there for your protection. Does Xena know about this?"

"I didn't think it was in my best interest to tell her. Besides, I had her put back Mirtiek's spell," I reminded him.

Mirtiek was one of his people who placed a spell on the crystal to prevent anyone from taking Keya's magic. The crystal would disappear if anyone should succeed in steal it or killing me for it. It

would only re-appear again when the next owner of this magic comes around. Xena was more than happy to recast that spell when I suggested it. A little too happy, if you asked me.

He didn't look pleased with my answer. "That is true, although I prefer to prevent that from happening. It was hard enough to find you."

"All of you can't protect me forever. I needed to learn how to protect myself and I can't do that with all of you guarding me."

There was a long pause as he looked at me then to the window before facing me again, "You may be right, Cassiea. I will relieve the scouts that are still here and let Xena know."

"Thank you, Shuron."

I turned to walk him to the door when I realized that he wasn't behind me. I turned back, surprised, to see he was sitting on the couch. I walked over and sat back on the chair to next him and asked, "Is there something else on your mind?"

"I hesitate to ask. This matter...I prefer that you were not involved in it, but it seems we have no choice. We need your help, Cassiea."

Curious as I was, I did not like the sound of what was to come. "What is it?"

"It is best that you come back home with me and meet with the elders."

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If you are eager to know what happens next, please buy my book at fine ebook retailers everywhere.