

**Preina**  
by Megan Lane

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## 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 lie 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.”



## Chapter 2

Their home, and what we called a town, was called Alyntia. Their living quarters or houses were called corts. When they were away from their home, each Elvain was assigned to a clan. There were five clans and each clan had a leader and an elder. The leader was in charge of the clan and took care of each clan members. The elders were representatives of each clan. When a situation arose, the five elders would gather with their lord, who was responsible for everyone that lived in Edeon. There were other elders besides the five main ones, and they were like our writers, historians and reporters. When the five main elders gathered with their lord, there was always a visor and one or two scouts present. Visors were Elvain who had the gift to see visions of the past and future. The scouts were harder to explain. Basically their responsibilities depended on their gifts, strengths, and magic levels. They were like our hunters, guards, detectives, soldiers, or assistants. They helped anyone who was in need of them.

Shuron led me to my cort that was assigned to me whenever I was here in their home. This was my first time seeing it and it looked the same as the previous one that I had stayed in when I first met them. It was small and clean with basic furnishings: a chair, a desk, a wardrobe and a bed. There were also a couple of standard clothing items in the wardrobe, clothes they used to go hunting, clothes they wore when they were home, one for sleeping, and a robe they used when they went to bathe.

Xena had mentioned to him that I had been out all night so he suggested I get some rest while we waited for the elders to arrive. Before my talk with Shuron, I was exhausted. Then afterwards, I was restless and nervous thinking about what they wanted from me. So instead of staying cooped up in the room waiting, I decided to take a walk. The last time I was here, I was mostly in bed recovering from a run in with Keya's sister, Nara, who wanted her sister's magic for herself. I came out of it barely alive and I was bedridden for most of my stay. I did not see much of their home and this was as good a time as any to have a look around.

The place was bustling with activity. People were scurrying about from one task to another. I was not sure what they did here when they were at home and I had to remind myself to ask Xena about this. There were no shops where you could buy products. There were no grocery stores, no clothing stores, no bakeries or anything you would find in a town or any place where a large population resides. From what I could remember, their corts were created by magic. Instead of cutting down trees to build their living quarters, they encouraged the plants to grow in certain ways to shape their living quarters to their specifications. The corts were beautifully created—even the one that was assigned to me. Whoever created their living quarters had not only considered constructing a functional space but also an aesthetic architectural structure. They used leaves, flowers, branches and even the tree trunks to form artistic motifs on the exterior and interior of the corts. Most of the living quarters were on the ground, while others were on top of trees and a few were under the ground.

They had no streets or sidewalks. The ground, around and within their home, was not paved with cement or stone. It was either dirt or grass. And surrounding their home were the forests. When I first ventured into the woods after realizing magic did exist, I was hoping to see or interact with some living trees that spoke or moved on their own. But to my disappointment, the trees were normal, just different from the ones that I was used to seeing in the city or in the parks. It should not have been a surprise since I was still on Earth and not in another dimension or planet. My only guess as to why the vegetation here were so different from the ones that I was used to was because these were the native plant life in this region before we urbanized the land to fit our standards. There were magical creatures but Shuron had told me that they had placed a spell that would prevent creatures of any kind from venturing too close to their home.

I did not know how far I walked. I was distracted by my thoughts about their need for my help.

What was so important that they needed my assistance? Granted, this magic that I possessed was powerful but how useful could I be when I didn't even know how to use it? I was also concerned by Shuron's reluctance and I wondered why. Was it because I was still inadequate in my understanding of this magic? And because of that, I might be more of a hindrance than help. I was so lost in thought that I didn't realize how far I had gone. Everywhere I turned and as far as I could see the forest surrounded me. I had lost the path that led back to their home.

I turned around and started walking towards the direction that I hoped I had come from. But I ended up in a small clearing filled with flowers. A stream of light poked through one of the overhanging trees that surrounded the place and illuminated a rock. It was like a beacon for weary travelers, inviting them in to rest in this field of peace and tranquility. I walked in without hesitation, and was instantly overwhelmed by a fragrance and explosion of vibrant colors that ranged from red to violet to blue. It seemed unreal and impossible to have such a place in the middle of nowhere surrounded by the dim and musty forest. The petals were wide, short, and pointed at the end. The stem only reached a few inches off the ground. And its leaves were long, narrow, and curled and twisted like vines. A few of the petals seemed to sparkle when I looked at them at a certain angle. I bent down and lightly glided my hands over them. They felt soft and cool to the touch. Little white lights started to dance around me. I held out my hand and one of them landed on the tip of my finger. I took a closer look and discovered that it was a very small person covered in light and with wings that fluttered. She took off leaving a trail off, sparkling dust behind. Then more of these creatures glided around me, leaving behind a trail sparkling dust. These fairies looked like tiny shooting stars moving all around me. I smiled in delight like a child seeing something new and exciting for the first time.

I had turned to follow them when the landscape changed. I was now standing in a field of grass with patches of flowers that went on for miles and miles as far as I could see. Slowly a vision in white appeared before me. It was a little girl. She looked oddly familiar to me though I knew that I had never seen her before. She smiled at me and I couldn't help but smile back. Her skin was pale white, almost translucent and her hair sparkled like it was made from tiny diamonds that gracefully fell down to her waist. Her eyes were the color of the sky and she wore a long, flowing gown that swayed and floated as she walked towards me. She held out her hand and I took it without hesitation. We began to rise above the ground and glided in the air. It was exhilarating. We flew over the fields, lakes and streams and into the clouds until we came to an area where there were children playing. We landed softly on the ground and the children instantly surrounded us. They were all smiling and laughing as they began to dance around me and motioned me to follow them as they played. I smiled and laughed with them as I joined in. I felt free and never wanted this feeling to end. Then one of them took my hand and I looked down at him. He looked concerned and said something to me. I couldn't hear what he was saying over the laughter of the others. I bent down to listen more closely and frowned at his words. His mouth did not move but I could hear him whisper inside my head.

\*Cassiea, wake up. You need to wake up.\*

I looked at him in confusion, wondering why he would say those words. I was not dreaming. It felt too real. I turned to look at the others and was alarmed to realize we were alone. Then my eyes became blurry and unfocused. Feeling drowsy, I stumbled back a few steps.

\*Cassiea you need to open your eyes for me.\* He echoed inside my head.

"No. I can't," I whispered. 'I don't want to,' I thought to myself.

\*Please, open your eyes for me, Cassiea.\*

I frowned down at him. There was a hint of urgency and desperation in his tone and I didn't know why he was acting this way. Suddenly the scenery started to change. The sky darkened, clouds appeared, and the wind blew. I looked down at the boy again. He looked up with worry and concern in his eyes. His expression scared me. Then the wind blew harder, carrying bits of grass and flowers that swirled everywhere around us making it impossible for us to see. I gathered him into my arms and closed my eyes. I prayed that the storm would pass soon and that we would be fine.

\*Open your eyes, Cassiea.\*

I heard him say this inside my mind but it was almost drowned out by the howling winds and roaring thunder around us.

\*You must wake up,\* he said.

I frowned at his words and thought to myself. I wasn't sleeping, was I? Suddenly, everything went quiet. Calmness settled in. The wind subsided, the clouds disappeared and the sun came out. When I felt his hand on my cheek I opened my eyes to see his amber eyes staring back at me. My eyelids started to droop. I felt sleepy and slowly closed my eyes, but his light tap on my cheeks kept them open.

"Where am I?" I asked him. I was drowsy and my head felt like it was stuffed with cottons.

"We are close to Alyntia."

He sounded relieved but still worried. I realized then that I was in his arms. I tried to move, but I didn't have the energy to even lift my arms.

"I need to sleep," I said.

"No, Cassiea, you must stay awake," he said urgently as he patted my cheeks again, harder this time. He then lifted me into his arms and started to walk.

"What happened? Why am I so sleepy?"

"You went into the Sonjuna field."

"Sonjuna?" I mumbled softly. My mind was still foggy from sleep.

"It is off limits to most people because the flowers' pollen makes you fall asleep and dream."

"Fairy dust, not flowers."

"It is the pollen. The fairy dust was part of your dream. Try not to go into the field from now on, Cassiea. Breathing in too much pollen, as you have, will make you sleep forever."

"Dream forever."

"What I meant was you may die from it."

"Oh, I knew that. Not a good thing. If it's so dangerous, why is it there?"

"The healers use the pollen for their medicine. Besides, the plants have every right to live as the rest of us do."

"Where are we going?"

"Back home. We have to meet with the elders."

"Elders?" I asked, trying to think of why that word sounded so familiar and important. But I was still having a hard time concentrating. "Elders," I whispered. When I finally remembered, my eyes popped open. I grabbed a fist-ful of his shirt as I looked up at him and said aloud, "The Elders! That's right! The meeting!" Then my eyelids started to droop again. I could feel the movement of his chest and the sound of his laughter at my outburst. Ignoring him, I yawned and placed my head on his shoulder and wrapped my arms around him, snuggling closer.

"I don't know why I am still so sleepy."

"You were in the field for too long. If I had not come when I did, it would have been too late to save you."

"But, I was only there for a couple of minutes."

"You have been gone for three hours."

"Oh. Well, you can put me down. I can walk."

"If I do, you will crumple to the ground. You are still affected by the pollen. Wait a while longer. When you breathe in enough fresh air, I will put you down."

"But it's so comfortable in your arms, it makes me sleepier." Then I lifted my head up a little and breathed in his scent. "You smell nice, like the forest. Are you a forest sprite?"

He chuckled at me. "No, Cassiea. I am not a forest sprite."

"It's Cass. I don't know why you keep calling me that. It is Cass."

"Isn't Cassiea your name?"

“Yes, but it sounds so weak and vulnerable. Cass is better. Bold and strong.”

“Then I will call you Cass.”

I smiled up at him. “And I will call you...”

I frowned. From my vantage point, in his arms, I couldn’t see his face very well.

I squinted and said, “You look familiar. We’ve met before?”

He stopped walking then and slowly placed me on my feet. I clung to him and his arms came around me when my legs gave out. We stood there in each other’s arms looking at each other. He swiped a strand of hair from my face and smiled at me.

“My name is Wolrik Kyre,” he said.

“You saved me once.”

“Yes.”

“And you saved me again.”

“Yes.”

“Thank you.”

He smiled at me in amusement. “Anytime, Herina.”

I frowned at him. “It’s Cass. My name is Cass.”

“Yes, I know.”

“Then why—never mind. I’m too tired to talk. Can we stay like this for a bit longer? I’m still a little sleepy,” I said as I placed my head on his chest.

He hugged me close and bent his head to rest on mine. “Take as long as you need Herina. I will wait for you.”

### Chapter 3

I wasn't sure how long we stood like this, in each other's arms, as I slowly awoke. My senses started to open and I began to notice my surroundings. I breathed in deeply the air around us and smelled the scent of the tree bark, the flowers, and his husky male scent. I could hear the rustling of leaves, the branches, and the beating of his heart. I could feel the breeze on my skin and the rise and fall of his chest. I became aware of the man who held me close. I felt warmth emitting from his body and the contours of his arms, his chest, and his stomach. He felt strong, solid, and something else that I couldn't put into words. It was more of a feeling. A feeling when a smell or a sound triggered a brief moment from ones past. It was a moment in time that gave me a feeling of contentment, peace, and a feeling of nostalgia, of wanting to go back or to be back in that moment in time.

My cheek briefly rubbed against his as I moved away from him, trying to break away from the emotion that he stirred in me. His hand touched the side of my face and slowly his thumb brushed against my mouth. My lips parted and our eyes meet. He glanced down to my mouth before he slowly lowered his head to kiss me. I could not help but melt back into his arms as he held me tightly and deepened the kiss. I grabbed on and kissed him back with equal intensity. My whole body was on fire and each touch from his hands on my skin sent a little jolt of pleasure. We were like two savage wolves, ravenous with hunger.

A high-pitched whistle streaked through the air, piercing our obsession and snapping us back to reality. We quickly moved away from each other. Breathing heavily, I looked at him in shock and horror at what we had just done and at my thoughts of wanting more. He was also breathing heavily and staring at me with an intensity that made my blood grow hot and my heart beat even faster. He was tense all over as if straining himself to stay still. I turned away, trying to smother my body's reaction to him, to calm down.

I didn't know how to handle this. I barely knew him and yet I was practically on top of him trying to devour him. What I did know was that I did not want to start anything with him. Though a year had passed since Von's death, the man whom I loved, he was still fresh in my mind. His sacrifice for me and the pain of not being able to prevent it—was still carved into my heart. I didn't think I had the strength to be with someone else and watch him die too.

The whistling sounded again. This time I listened carefully and realized it was a bird singing. I looked up into the tree above me and saw a beautiful bird perched on top of a branch. I'd never seen this type of bird before but it reminded me of a peacock with its colorful plumage that seemed to capture all the colors of the rainbow. It was half the size of a peacock and on top of the head was a cluster of cottony white feathers, very fine and soft, that swayed softly in the light breeze. A streak of gold went down its back, as if a soft stroke of a brush had gracefully glided down from its head to its neck. The head, neck, and breast area had iridescent purple-blue plumage while its body and wings were shades of blue and green. Its tail was a cascade of short, then medium to long, feathers that extended to twice the size of the bird's body. Each tail feather had vibrant iridescent colors of red, purple, orange, and yellow. The vanes on the feather shafts gradually shortened almost to a stub before they widened again until it came to a long soft point at the end.

Wolrik walked over and stood next to me. "Prunira," he said under his breath.

"Is that what the bird is called?"

"Yes. It is a very rare bird. All of us thought it was extinct at one time. We are fortunate to see one at all."

"She is very beautiful."

"This bird is a male. The females have white feathers. They are not as colorful as the males but they are equal in beauty."

“It is very unusual. It reminds me of a peacock from my world.”

“I know of those birds. Our elders believe they are from the same ancestor. Would you like me to pluck one of the feathers for you?”

“That’s awfully tempting but I don’t think he would appreciate it.”

The bird was unaware of our presence. We stood there in silence watching and listening to the bird sing. After a couple of minutes, we watched as the bird ruffled its feathers and then took flight. During take-off, one of his tail feathers fell. Wolrik held out his hand and slowly the feather glided towards him until it landed on his palm.

“Will you accept my offering?” He held it out to me.

“Thank you,” I said as I smiled up at him. I held it up to look at it. The tail feather was only twelve inches long. It was from one of the shorter ends. From what I could tell and by my estimated guess, the longest tail feather seemed to reach at least four feet long.

“It’s as if the bird meant to give it to us,” I said, more to myself than to him.

“An old tradition of ours is to tie it in our hair. Would you like me to do this for you?” he said.

I nodded and handed it back to him. He took a string from his pouch that he wore around his waist. Facing me, his arms went around my head to tie the feather to my hair. While he was doing this, I took the time to study him. His general features were like the other Elvains—tall and lean. Their hair color ranged from light blond to brown and black. And most of them, the scouts, who spent their time in the woods, had black to medium brown hair with green, light brown, and tan highlights. His hair color was similar to the scout’s. It was black with streaks of medium brown, green and tan highlights. Like most of them, he wore his hair long; down to his shoulders. His almond-shaped eyes were a color that reminded me of amber. There was a beauty mark above his right eyebrow and a scar under his lower lip. I wanted to run my finger over it, but I resisted the temptation. When he was done, he smoothed the feather down until his hand rested on my shoulders.

He had a look in his eyes that made my heart stop for a second before it started beating faster than normal. My hand went to my stomach trying to stop the fluttering sensation. I quickly stepped back and looked away, feeling uncomfortable by the intensity of his eyes and by my reaction to them.

“We should go,” I said to him. “They must be waiting for us.”

He was silent for a moment before he spoke. “It will be faster if you lead the way.”

I moved away when he stepped forward and lifted his fingers towards me.

“I am going to send you an image of where they will be, Cass,” he explained. I could hear the hurt in his voice.

“I’m sorry. It’s just…”

How was I supposed to tell him that even though the kiss meant everything to me and I was attracted to him, I didn’t want anything to do with him? I wanted us to forget that it ever happened and just go on our separate ways. I wanted us to be apart from each other.

“I would never hurt you,” he said when I was silent for a long time.

“I know. What happened before, when we—I don’t think it is a good idea to let it happen again.”

“Why?”

“I’m not ready for this and don’t ask me why I’m not or when I will be or any other questions that I don’t know the answer to. I just know that I don’t want this—us.”

I could tell he didn’t like it. His eyes burned into mine and I was silently pleading to him to understand, to let it go. He turned away and walked several steps away from me. It felt like an eternity before he turned around and came back.

“I am going to send you an image of where we will meet the elders. I need to touch your temple to do this.”

I looked at him, trying to figure out what he was thinking. Was he agreeing with me or was he pretending that what I had just said never happened? I was too afraid of what the answer would be so I stayed silent. I bit my lower lip and nodded. He slowly came forward, giving me time to adjust to his

nearness, and then he lightly touched my temple with the tips of his two fingers. I breathed in sharply at the tingling sensation running through my head. An image flashed inside my mind of a small clearing surrounded by the forest. There was a small hearth in the middle of the clearing and several rocks around it. The image disappeared when he lifted his fingers from my temple.

“Did you see it?”

I nodded to him.

“It is amazing that all of you could do that.”

“It is with our magic. In time, once you have a handle on yours, you will also be able to do this.”

I smiled at him at the prospect.

“Really? I can’t wait. But why did you show me this image?” I asked.

“So that you may lead the way. If I did, we would need to walk for another hour to get there. With your magic, you can lead us right to the place.”

One of the most interesting things that the Elvains could do with their magic was making doorways or openings to other places. For example, instead of walking or driving from one building to another three blocks down, they could make an opening that took them right in front of the other building. But making an opening had its limitations. It could only take them within a five-mile radius from where they stood. The magic I possessed, had no limitations. I could make an opening to the other side of the earth if I wanted to. But since I was still learning how to control this magic. It was harder for me to use than those, like him, who used magic all of their life. I cringed inwardly because I knew that we would still end up walking.

“I don’t think it will work. I am still not very good at this.”

“Xena had told me that you were able to send creatures back here.”

“Making an opening, that I can do. Having it open to the right place, that I am still working on perfecting.”

“I have every confidence you will succeed.”

“I wish there was some way to give me some of your confidence.” I took a deep breath, concentrated on the image that he gave me and drew a line in the air with the crystal that held the magic. A bright line started to form following my downward motion. Then it slowly opened to a wooded area that was not where we wanted to be.

“Try it again,” he encouraged, “this time try not to focus too much on the image itself but of the place that you want to go to.”

I nodded, closed my eyes, and brought up the image. Then I placed myself in it as if I were there. When I was ready, I opened my eyes and made an opening. The clearing where we were supposed to meet the elders was a few yards away.

“It worked!” I exclaimed. “I mean, I know that it didn’t open to the spot you showed me but I was very close, closer than I have ever been. Thank you,” I said to him.

He nodded his head and smiled back at me. “It will get better and easier in time.”

We stepped through and headed for the clearing. Mirra spotted us and walked over to meet us halfway. When she and I had first met, she did not like me. She did not trust me with Keya’s magic and it didn’t help that I was with Von, whom she loved. It also did not help that he had died to protect me when Nara tried to kill me to get her sister’s magic. Eventually, Mirra made her peace with me. I wished I could say that we were friends. A year had passed since I last saw her and I didn’t know if our truce was still intact. I would have liked us to be friends but that was up to her. All I wanted right now, during my time here, was to get along with everybody, including her.

When she was close enough, she smiled at both of us.

“You found her,” she said to Wolrik.

She then turned to me. “Greetings, Cassiea, it has been a while.”

The wind blew and I swiped my hair back from my face. When I did that, I saw her smile fading before it quickly returned. She turned to Wolrik, who gave her a warning look, before turning back to

me.

“Where did you get that feather?”

I glided my hand down it and said to her, “Wolrik gave it to me. We saw this bird and one of his feathers fell out when he took off and Wolrik got it for me.”

“Prunira,” she said.

“Yes, that is the name of the bird,” I replied. “Is there something wrong?” I asked her. She looked upset when I confirmed the origin of the feather.

She shook her head before smiling again. “Nothing,” she said, “I thought they were extinct.”

Just then, Shuron came up to us. He placed both hands on Mirra’s shoulders and smiled down at her. At the same time, she smiled up at him. She placed a hand on his before he let go. It was such an intimate gesture that it distracted me and so I did not hear what he had to say. All I could do was stand there gaping at their retreating forms. When had they started seeing each other?

“Are they together?” I asked Wolrik, who was still beside me. “When did this happen?”

“I am not sure myself since I have been away for a while. All I know is that they are in love and expecting a child soon.”

I was surprised, then relieved. I was glad that she was able to move on. When we got to the clearing, the first people I saw were the elders: 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. They either stared at me in surprise, disapproval, or a smile that said they knew what I knew. But the thing was, I didn’t know anything. Their greetings made me feel uncomfortable and self-conscious. I was about to ask them what was going on when I saw movement to my left. I turned to see a woman around my age, mid-twenties or so. She didn’t look pleased to see me. In fact, she looked as if she was going to murder someone and that someone was me. I looked around to see if anyone else saw her reaction. Unfortunately, they were busy talking amongst themselves.

I gave a small yelp when I turned back to see she was standing right in front of me, face-to-face and smiling. She was a couple of inches taller than me, about five feet six inches, which was surprising since all the Elvains whom I had met were either at or above six feet tall. She had the same features as the Elvain’s but with a slight difference. Besides her height, she had blond, pixie-style hair and a sharper chin and nose. Her skin was slightly lighter than the others. She was dressed in a simple style that accentuated her delicate bones. The colors of her clothes were a mix of white, beige, and a hint of purple. This was very different from the rest of them who, when they were not working, dressed in very colorful clothing. What was similar to the others was that her hair was adorned with colorful and ornate ornaments.

“Greetings, Cassiea, my name is Pixiena, but you may call me ‘Pixi’ since I know we will be the best of friends. I have heard a lot about you and it is an honor to finally meet you since I have been pestering Mirra to find a way to introduce me to you. She said we should not distract you from your training with Tirena and to wait until you are done, though I was hoping I would be able to see you sooner but alas, my hope did not bear fruit. Now that you are finally here, I am able to introduce myself,” she said in a quiet, gentle, but excited voice.

I blinked several times, trying to get my bearings on what she was saying. I was still calming myself down from the scare she had given me when she started to talk rapidly. It was so fast that I was unable to take in most of what she said. She sounded friendly enough and I started to wonder if I had imagined that murderous look on her face earlier. But then I could have sworn there was an insult somewhere in her introduction to me. She was smiling at me in such an angelic way that I became infected by it. I could not help but to smile back at her.

“Umm...Hi Pix, I’m glad to meet you too. Please call me Cass.”

“Cass. That name is very masculine of you. I like it. It suits you. And it is Pixi, not Pix,” she said and gave me another one of her angelic smiles.

My smile stayed plastered on my face but internally I was miffed. Did she insult me again? I



opened my mouth to say something but she had already turned and left. I stood there dumfounded. Then I sighed. I wondered who else was going to pop up and welcome me. This was going to be a very, very long day. I took a seat on one of the rocks that surrounded the pit and waited for the meeting to get started. It didn't take long. Shuron stepped into the center and started to speak.

"Cassiea, the reason we brought you here is because we need your help. To be more precise, we need your magic to help send me back several years into the past."

"You're joking, right? That is impossible."

"I am afraid it is very possible. It is against our laws to do so. Unfortunately, in this situation, which I will explain to you in a few minutes, there was no choice in the matter and we were given permission to travel to the past."

"I don't understand. Did something happen? Who gave you the permission?" I asked, and thought to myself, was it the time travel police?

"Something devastating will happen if we do not fix the problem."

"What is it that all of you are afraid of?"

He looked at the elders. There was a silent message that passed between them before he turned back to me.

"A couple of years ago, about the time we found you, there were rumors that Nara was looking for the Sighyn stone. This stone is very rare and there are only three that we know of that existed in our lifetime. Two have been destroyed and one was lost through the centuries until now. When Nara died, Norus, her apprentice, continued the search. Wolrik had been tracking the rumors since we first heard of it. It was a month ago when he found out that Norus had discovered the whereabouts of the Sighyn stone. He found old documents from your world regarding a man by the name of Gairen Merigold who discovered the stone on one of his trips. Upon traveling back home, the ship that he was on, the Marianne, was lost at sea. Norus went back to the past to take the stone from Merigold."

"What is so special about this stone?"

"It gives a person immortality. Norus' magic is powerful, equal to his predecessor. If he finds the stone and controls Nara's minions, he will be unstoppable even if he goes against you, Cassiea," Grinfir answered.

A chill went down my back. This was definitely very bad. If I, who supposedly had the highest level of magic, was not able to defeat Norus, then we were all in trouble.

"What is it that you need me to do?" I asked. "I still don't have full control of this magic."

"Traveling into the past is not an easy task to begin with," Shuron said. "It takes a great deal of magic to do so. And if you succeed in going back, it is not always guaranteed you will step back to the place you want to be. You might end up a month to a year from the date you intended. Also, you may not succeed in stepping back to the location you wanted. You may end up several miles away or in a town or two away. If you want to be at the precise date, time and location, it will require an immense amount of magic. You will also need someone who can see into the future, the past, and the pareal."

"Pareal?"

"It means seeing the multiple or possible outcomes of time. Every choice we make has different possible outcomes. A person who is able to see into the pareal can see each of these outcomes resulting from that one choice. They are also able to detect any slight disturbance in the past that is affecting the present."

"So you need a greater source of magic power to go back?"

"Normally we do not. The opal is sufficient enough for us to use. Pixi can see into the pareal and though Mirra is able to see into the future, it is not as strong as her gift to see into the past. There are no other visors that have a level-five magic with the gift of seeing into the future. We need your help to amplify her weaker gift."

"Why didn't you just take the crystal when you met me? I would have given it to you," I said to him while I took off my necklace that held the crystal.

Wolrik stopped me from handing it to Shuron and placed the necklace back around my neck.

“It is not that simple, Cass,” Wolrik said to me. “You forget that your magic is not ours to hold and it will turn us evil. Mirra, along with the others, will be using a lot of their magic and energy. They will be vulnerable to your magic if she or anyone of them take it.”

“Then how will she be able to use it?”

“You will join us when we send Shuron to the past,” Mirra said. “You will be connected to the opal as the rest of us. I will draw your powers from there. As long as you are linked to your magic, I and everyone else will be safe.”

“Okay. When do we start?” I asked because I wanted to get this over with as soon as possible.

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Balkar stepped in front of Wolrik, preventing him from following the others.

“She will be fine. You have an assignment that needs your immediate attention.”

Wolrik looked over the elder’s shoulder to the group that was moving farther away from him. He held himself still and fought the urge to rush over to where they were. He could not help but focus on Cass. The overwhelming need to protect her and the fear he felt for her overcame his better judgment. He move to go. Wolrik was five steps away when his body became immovable as if his will was not his own. He realized then that Balkar used his magic to keep him still.

“I am sorry. I cannot let you go with her. Her mission is not yours follow. Wolrik, you know as well as I that she will be fine. You need to concentrate on your other assignment.”

“Let me go Balkar. There has to be someone else who can take my place? I would like to stay beside her.”

“Again I am sorry, but you must stay. Some of the creatures and our own people have been missing for two years now. We have been unsuccessful in finding their whereabouts. Now that you are free, it is imperative that you find out what has happen to them.” He placed a hand on Wolrik’s shoulder before saying, “We would not ask this of you if it were not important. You are one of our best trackers and you have the ears of the people in Endore and in Tyrin.”

“Have you asked Marcus for help? He knows Cassiea’s people and the Endores better than I do.”

“Let us see what you can find out first.”

Wolrik looked back at the now empty road before nodding, to him and then he left.

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An ancient tree stood at the center of their home. Its trunk was about thirty feet in diameter and two hundred feet tall. It bore no leaves, which seemed at odds with the surrounding greenery. Shuron drew a line with his finger on the trunk of the tree and a glowing of light followed the path of the line. Then slowly an opening appeared, showing a set of stairs that led deep under the ground. We stepped into a chamber that was about three hundred square feet of space. It looked more like a cave than a room. There were several floating lights hovering above us. The walls were lined with roots that poked through from the ceiling and buried themselves down to the ground. On the walls the roots twisted and turned on themselves to create several shelves. These shelves held crystals of different sizes, shapes, and colors. The stairs that we just came from disappeared and were replaced by more shelves and crystals.

I realized it was just the four of us: Shuron, Mirra, Pix, and me. They gathered in the center of the room to wait for me. And in the center, stood a long stone about five feet high. On top of it, sat a round crystal, about ten inches in radius. The inside was filled with clouds of swirling colors. I knew it must be the opal they were talking about. They stood on each side and I walked over to fill the empty space.

“I am going to send you an image,” Shuron said to me before he placed the tip of his two fingers on my temple.

As before, I felt a tingling sensation spreading through my head and an image appeared. It was an

image of an entrance to a building. The building looked old, like it had been built centuries ago. I couldn't tell where it was, but I could feel that this place was old and part of the past.

“Is this the place where Norus went?”

“Since he doesn't have the advantage as we do, he might be at a different location or at a different date, but we believe this is where he will end up.”

“Why?”

“Because this is the last known location where Merigold was said to be before he went on board the Marianne. What I need you to do is to concentrate on that image while placing your palm on the opal. We will do the rest. It would help if your eyes were closed.”

I nodded to him and rested my palm on the opal. The rest of them did the same. I closed my eyes and concentrated on the image that Shuron gave me. There was a flood of electrical current that ran down my body as if I were being scanned. Then I felt a little tug, and a pull from the center of my chest. Even with my eyes closed, I could tell that the room was starting to grow brighter. Suddenly there was a flash of light and an electrical charge zapped my hand that was on the opal. I let go from the shock and opened my eyes to see a surprised Wolrik on the other side. I cupped my hand that was still feeling the pain of the shock to my chest. The others were gone and only he and I were alone in the room.

“Wolrik,” I said to him, “what are you doing here and what happened to the others?”

I turned to the sound behind me and saw a man, at the stairs. He was surprised to see me, too. I squinted at him. He looked so familiar but I couldn't place him. Then my eyes widened in shock and disbelief.

“Loquis,” I whispered.

“Yes,” he confirmed, “do I know you?”

My hand flew to my mouth and I gave a small cry. My eyes started to tear. The first time I saw him, he was an old man and the last time I saw him, he was lying dead on the ground. Now, he was young, vital and alive. I ran to him and hugged him close, so glad that he was alive.

“You are alive,” I said. Then everything went dark.

## Chapter 4

I was in a room filled with darkness. Though there wasn't any light, I was able to see a vast empty space and a mirror. I walked over to the mirror and saw a figure that was not my own. She moved when I moved. She gestured when I gestured. She frowned when I frowned. But the face in the mirror was not mine. I lightly touched the glass and so did she. The glass was cold and solid to the touch. I looked into the eyes that weren't my own and saw a perplexed look that matched mine. Suddenly, her hand shot out through the glass and grabbed my throat.

My eyes widened in horror. I struggled to get free. She smiled in pleasure and then started to laugh with joy. I clawed at her hand trying desperately to free myself, to draw air into my lungs. A film of red covered my eyes and little black dots started to float around me. I felt lightheaded and my eyelids were heavy. This was the end, I thought. This was where I would die.

"You will not succeed," I heard her say. "You will die and I will be reborn."

Dead. Reborn. I could feel myself floating. I don't want to die. No! I shouted to myself. No! I screamed inside my head. I want to live! My hand shot out in front of her and a blaze of light blasted out from my hand. She was forced back from me and she screamed in pain and rage.

I woke up coughing and gasping for air. I was soaked in sweat and shivering. When my heart stopped racing and my breathing returned to normal, I let the nightmare play through my mind. It felt so real—like that woman was really choking me. Who was she? And, why did she feel so familiar to me?

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A scream of rage echoed within the compound of an old castle surrounded by a moat. She flung her arms out in every direction, sending a blast of light that hit anything and anyone in its path. Her minions screamed in fright. Most of them who ran for the door were killed instantly by the blast of light. Others stood still, too frightened to move, and were hit by falling objects as a result of the blast. One man was on the ground in a fetal position shaking in horror at her madness. When she finally calmed down, she looked at the destruction and the four minions who were left standing in her chamber.

She snarled at them before lifting her arms. They started to scream in pain and fell to the ground. She smiled at the blood seeping out of their bodies and chuckled as they pleaded for mercy. She watched in amusement as they lay lifeless. Glancing at her apprentice, who was beside her, she smiled with approval at the novices' glazed eyes from both hunger and pleasure at the carnage before them. She turned sharply at the sound to her right and watched the man trying to inch his way to safety. She lifted her hand and he was swiftly pulled to her. She grabbed his neck and squeezed.

"You said she was weak. Not in full control of my magic. It will be easy to kill her. You lied to me!" she screamed at him.

His eyes were bulging out of their sockets. He was trying to say something but her grip on his throat made it impossible. Just when he was starting to fade, she let go and he went down like a sack. As he gulped for air, she turned and walked over to her throne to sit down.

"Forgive me my queen. I was only relaying to you what I have been told. They all said she had failed their test and her use of your magic was erratic to—"

"Enough!" she shouted at him. "It does not matter. She will die eventually. Once I have defeated the Elvain, she will no longer exist. You will get me the Sighya stone. Do not fail me a second time," she warned him.

"Yes, my queen," he said to her while bowing.

He quickly left before she changed her mind. Once the door shut behind him, Keya lifted her arm

towards the four bodies. A light appeared from the center of their chests before it grew bigger and brighter. Their torsos lifted as if someone was pulling them by a string. A small, glowing orb was pulled out from each body and they glided toward her. A box appeared on her lap. She lifted the lid and each glowing orb darted into it.

“Take this,” she ordered, “and give it to the general. These souls will be added to our new soldiers. And once you are done, follow him.” She gestured to the now closed door. “When he finds the Sighyn stone, kill him.”

Her apprentice bowed before leaving to do her bidding.

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Their home was oddly empty. This morning, there were dozens of people walking around, talking and laughing, going about their daily routine. But, as I opened the door of my cort, it was eerily quiet and bare. I roamed my surroundings and called out to anyone. There was no answer—just silence greeted me. I walked farther out, making sure I didn’t go too far. I reminded myself of what happened earlier when I stumbled into a clearing with those Sonjuna flowers. After a while, I came upon a lake and was about to turn around when I heard a loud rustling noise coming from my left. The next thing I knew, I was tackled from the side and we both landed on the muddy ground.

“Von! Slow down and wait for me!” a girl shouted as she came out of the bushes. She stopped when she saw us.

We were trying to get up when we suddenly stopped. Both of us looked shocked to see the other. I didn’t know his reason, but mine was his name, Von. Memories flashed through my mind. I quickly got up and turned to look at him. The person in front of me was only a boy, in his early teens. My guess, about fourteen. Though his features were child-like, he reminded me so much of the man I knew from a year ago. He had his looks and his name. How was this possible? The girl, who was close to his age, went over to stand next to him and I was shocked again to see another familiar face. She resembled a younger version of Mirra.

“You are the Tyrinian everybody is talking about,” she said.

I wasn’t sure what she meant by that but I was too distracted to ask her to explain. Once my initial shock was over, I realized something I hoped I was wrong about.

“Is your name Mirra Kyre?” I asked. Then I looked at the boy who was still staring at me. “And is your name Von Arey?”

The girl stiffened and became guarded.

“How do you know our names?” she asked.

I slowly went down on my knees at the realization. I was right. I had gone back in time. Something must have gone wrong and I traveled back instead of Shuron. This boy in front of me was not yet the man that I had known, the Von of my past, the man whom I loved and lost. He had somehow come back to me. I had long ago accepted his death but now, looking at his younger self, mixed emotions ran through me like a tidal wave. A small hand touched my shoulder. When I looked up, I saw him in front of me.

“Do not be sad. I will protect you. You have my promise.”

Big words coming from such a small boy. It was so like the man I knew. I was swallowed up with so many emotions that all I could do was smile at him.

“You are beautiful,” he whispered.

A small sound came from my throat and tears started to form. My hands were shaking when I touched his cheeks. I missed him so much. Footsteps from behind me disrupted my thoughts. I turned away from all of them to try to rein in and smother my emotions. When I had composed myself, I turned to see Loquis had joined us. He was frowning at the three of us.

“Von. Mirra. The two of you know that you are not supposed to wander around by yourselves.”

“We are sorry, Loquis. We heard about the Tyrinian and wanted a look for ourselves,” Von said and

Mirra nodded in agreement.

“Well now that you have seen her, please return to your courts. I will stop by later to have a more thorough talk with the two of you.”

“I would like to help her,” Von said to Loquis.

“If Von is helping, I want to help too,” Mirra said. But when she looked at me, she wasn’t too pleased about it.

“That will not be necessary though our lord and I thank the both of you for volunteering. Please, do as asked.”

“But...”

“Von, you know as well as I do that this is not the time to argue,” Loquis said in a tone that didn’t leave room for arguments.

He stubbornly stood his ground, wanting to argue further. If it wasn’t for Mirra pulling him along, I think they would have argued some more. Once they were out of hearing distance, he turned and looked at me quizzically. My guess was, he was unsure of what to do with me.

“Are you feeling better?” he asked.

“Yes, thank you.”

He nodded and a moment passed before he spoke again.

“May I ask what you are called by?” he inquired.

“Called by? You mean my name?” I responded.

When he nodded his head I smiled. I had forgotten that the Loquis of this timeline did not know me.

“My name is Cass,” I said.

“Greetings, Cass. My name is Loquis Tilet.”

“Yes I know,” I said.

He smiled. “Yes, of course. You called me by my name in the chamber. Please, if you would follow me, we have a meeting with our lord,” he said as he motioned for me to go first.

“The elders are not joining us this time?”

“Elders?”

“Yes, the elders. They are always at the meetings, at least the ones that I have gone to. They are representatives of your five clans, aren’t they?”

“The elders will not be here for this one. It will only be our lord, Wolrik and I.”

We were quiet most of the way. Every so often he would look my way and I had a feeling he wanted to ask me something, but I was too caught up with my own thoughts to help satisfy him with answers. The Shuron from my time was supposed to be here looking for Norus and the Sighyn stone. He was the only one who knew where to start and what to do. How was I supposed to figure everything out? I had a name of the man who had the stone, and a ship’s name. Where should I even start? The world was too big to find one man and one ship. And if, by some miracle, I did find the stone, how would I get back? Was I going to be stuck here forever? I was interrupted from my thoughts when I heard him clearing his throat.

“May I ask you something personal?” Loquis asked. When I nodded, he proceeded, “The feather you wear in your hair, did I give it to you?”

My hand instinctively went to the feather in question. I had forgotten about it. “No, it was Wolrik. We were going to meet with the elders when we saw a Prunira. One of his feathers fell when he was taking flight and Wolrik took it and gave it to me. Why do you ask?”

“I was curious. Those birds are rare and you are lucky to have seen one.”

“That is what they keep telling me,” I replied.

I had a suspicious feeling there was another reason everyone was commenting on the feather.

“May I?” He lifted his hand.

I nodded and felt his hand smooth down the feather on my head. He then lifted the necklace from

my neck.

“And the necklace you wear, did he also give this to you?”

He let go when I reached for it. I held it at eye level and frowned when I noticed it looked different than usual. I lifted it higher to get a better look. Something was wrong. Usually I could see a swirl of colorful lights within the crystal, but now it was clear. Then I realized that I didn't feel it, the magic that was held within the crystal. Most of the time, I could sense something, like a light touch on my chest. Now, I felt nothing. I closed my eyes and concentrated on absorbing the magic into my body, but nothing happened. What was going on? Did the magic disappear when I went back in time? Does that mean if I returned to my own time, I would have no magic at all?

“Is there something wrong?”

“What?”

“Are you all right?”

“Oh, yes. I mean no... I don't know...”

“What is it?” he said with concern.

I looked at him in alarm.

“The magic is gone.”

When he looked confused, I started to explain. “This crystal held magic that I can use, or at least it did. It is gone. I don't feel it.”

I held my hand out in front of me and tried to move the leaves on the ground with magic, but nothing happened. The leaves stayed still. Great; this was just what I needed. This magic had to pick the worst time to stop working. How would I stop this Norus from taking the Sighyn stone if I didn't have any magic to help me? My situation had just gotten worse and I was afraid to move any further for fear that there would be more to come.

“We better go,” Loquis said, interrupting my thoughts.

I looked up at him and balked. Then I sighed and dragged my feet along until we were at a clearing. It was the same place I had been that morning when I met with the elders only this time there were the four of us.

Loquis introduced me to their Lord, who was sitting on a rock. He looked familiar to me, as if I had seen him somewhere before, though I couldn't place where. He had blond, braided hair that reached down to his waist. His almond-shaped blue eyes looked tired and restless, battle-worn. There were faint scratches and bruises on his face and arms and blood-stains on his clothes. He was covered with sweat and dirt as if he had just come from a battlefield. The chest plate he wore over his uniform had seen a lot of use. A shield and sword were propped against his leg near his hand, to grab and use at a moment's notice.

I listened as Loquis cast a spell on us to make sure that none of us spoke to anyone about what we said in this meeting. If one of us did, then the others would know and punishment would fall unto that person. I had heard this spell before when I first met with the elders and half listened while my thoughts wandered to their lord. From what I could remember, from my timeline, and from what Loquis had told me, they had a clan war and a war with Keya. I wondered which one he had just come from or, perhaps, this was an entirely different war. I hoped it was not the war with Keya. If it was, it would be a very short welcome for me since I was the reincarnation of Keya and they might assume that I was as evil as she was.

I wondered if I should even tell them about Keya and me or if I should leave that out. Should I tell them why I was here? Would they believe me and could they help me? Someone called out my name. When I looked up, I saw all eyes were on me. My face turned red at being caught at not paying attention. I apologized and Loquis gave me a reassuring smile. Their lord was frowning at me but said nothing.

“Please Cass, if you could tell us how you came to be in the Runier chamber.”

“Runier? Oh, you mean the place where your opal is?”

“You know about the opal?” their lord asked me.

“Yes, that’s how I came here, assuming I’m right and I have gone back in time.”

They all looked at one another.

“I think you should tell us everything, starting from the year you came from.”

I explained to him about Shuron needing my help so he could go back in time to stop Norus from getting the Sighyn stone, but something went wrong and I ended up here instead of him. When I was done, they were quiet for a while, each in his or her own thoughts. I could tell that they were worried by what I had told them.

“You said that Shuron came to you for help?” When I nodded, their lord continued. “What exactly did he need from you?”

“Well…”

This was the part where I didn’t know if I should tell them the truth or lie. If I told them that I had Keya’s magic—that I used to have her magic, since it was not working at the moment—and that I was the reincarnation of Keya, would they believe me? If they did believe me and thought I was as evil as she was, then would they throw me into a dungeon? If I was locked up, then I would not be able to find Norus or the stone. I looked up when Loquis said my name again.

I cleared my throat. “He needed the magic that I have to bring him here. In order to travel to the exact date, time and location, he needed the opal and three people. One who could see the future, one who could see the past and one who could see the pareal.”

They nodded, thus convincing me they knew what I was talking about, so I went on. “They have someone with the gift of seeing into the pareal and the past. They needed a person to see into the future.”

“And you have that gift?” their lord asked.

“Not exactly, Mirra—”

“Mirra Kyre, of the clan MilTork?” Wolrik interrupted.

“Yes, Mirra also has the gift to see into the future, though not as strong as her gift to see into the past. I was brought in to boost her weaker gift. But as I said before, something went wrong and I ended up here instead of Shuron.”

“How were you able to do this?” their Lord inquired. “I do not know of anyone with this level of magic.”

I fidgeted, not wanting to tell them but I didn’t know what else to say. After a moment, I sighed. I didn’t think I had a choice. My mind had drawn a blank at a good and believable answer.

“Umm…well, the magic is technically not mine,” I said. Then I saw them stiffen and in a flash they all moved at once, placing their hands on the hilts of their swords.

My eyes widened. I was surprised and scared by their reaction. It had been a bad choice of words when I remembered that the only way to acquire magic was through blood magic, to take magic from others by force and death. Thinking that, I thought of Keya and cringed. I really hated this. I held out my hand, a gut reaction one does when one wants the others to stop in their tracks or, in my case, stop them from thinking the wrong things. Before I could even open my mouth, Wolrik was in front of their lord and I was flying in the air, landing hard a few feet away from them. He was above me in an instant with one arm extended towards me, ready to strike again if I moved even an inch.



## Chapter 5

I stared at him in shock. He looked lethal and ready to kill. I lay on the ground, still as a stone, not wanting to provoke him any further. It was too late to remember that when I was here, I was to avoid extending my arm. Xena had told me that if I was ever to encounter any magic beings I was not friends with, extending my hand would be considered an aggressive move since most people use their hands to conjure their magic. They would think I was going to do them harm by using magic. Suddenly, there was a commotion to my right and neither one of us turned to see what it was. I saw a flash of light at the corner of my eye where the noise came from. He must have noticed it too, and without taking his eyes off of me, he held up his other hand to deflect the light that was aimed at him.

“Let her go!” I heard someone shout.

“What are the three of you doing here? I told all of you to stay in your courts,” I heard Loquis said to them.

“He is hurting her. I made a promise to her that I will protect her.” Wolrik deflected another flash of light before I heard Von speak again. “I said, let her go!”

“Please Von, we must go,” a female voice pleaded.

“I will not! I will fight you if I have to, Wolrik.”

Another blast was deflected from the man above me. During this time he had not said a word, moved or looked away from me. His hard, steely eyes honed in on mine—he was so very different from the Wolrik of my time.

“Von,” another voice came through the tension in the air. “Have you not noticed that she is still alive? You know that anyone who threatens our lord in such a way would have been killed in an instant. If Wolrik had wanted to, she would be dead now. Look at her, she is not harmed in any way.”

“He is right,” I said and slowly turned my head towards Von. I gave him a smile, one that I hoped was reassuring. “It was my fault and Wolrik was only doing his job—protecting your lord.”

I slowly sat up, making sure that Wolrik didn’t think I was going to try anything.

“I am sorry,” I said as I looked at their lord. “I’m still not used to this whole magic thing. I forgot that Xena, I mean Tirenna, had told me not to point my arms or hand towards anyone who doesn’t know me well if I didn’t want to start a fight.”

Their lord accepted my apology with a nod. Loquis smiled at me and Wolrik, after his initial surprise, nodded in consent. He took my left hand and turned it slightly to reveal a gash running five inches down my arm. It must have happened when I went down. He slowly slid his hand down the wound. I could feel heat from where his hand was and saw the gash slowly disappearing. I looked up in surprise and thanked him. He nodded, slid his hand farther until his held mine and tugged lightly to help me stand. When I was up, he held on a little bit longer than necessary before letting go and then walked back to his lord’s side. Von quickly came over to me. I could see on the young boy’s face the hard lines of determination to defend me from anyone who would do me harm. Even in this timeline, he would go against his better judgment to keep me safe. I didn’t know how I could deter him from being my protector—my champion.

Their lord motioned to the boy who had reasoned with Von. Though I shouldn’t have been surprised, I was when I realized it was Shuron. Now I knew why their lord looked so familiar. He was Shuron’s father. The resemblance was slight but distinctive. They started whispering to each other and I turned to see Mirra looking at me as if I were a plague that needed to be wiped out.

“Are you all right?”

I looked down to see Von’s worried face.

“I’m okay. Shuron is right. Wolrik would not have harmed me. He was just protecting your lord.”

He didn’t look convinced and I didn’t know how to reassure him. At that moment, the father and

son finished talking. Shuron came over to us. He nodded to me in greeting before facing Von.

“We better go.”

“I will not leave her here alone,” Von said stubbornly.

I placed a hand on his shoulder. “It’s all right. I promise you that I will be okay. I need to talk to them alone.”

I was relieved when he relented and watched them disappear before I turned back to them.

“When I said that the magic wasn’t mine, I meant that I inherited it from someone else.”

I waited to see how they would react to this news. Their facial expressions remained unchanged, unreadable and guarded.

“The magic came from Keya. Loquis from my timeline had told me he killed her but all of you were unable to destroy her magic. Since I was the reincarnation of her, I inherited her magic,” I added.

They were surprised and shocked except for Loquis who seemed satisfied with my answer as if I had just confirmed his theory. This didn’t surprise me. In what little time I had spent with him during my timeline, he always seemed to know more than he let on.

“Hard to believe but it is true. Fortunately, you don’t need to worry about me. Keya’s magic in this crystal,” I held it up for them to see, “is gone.”

I thought I would see skepticism on their faces but Loquis had his knowing smile. Their lord nodded in understanding and Wolrik was unreadable. They were quiet as if waiting for more revelations. I didn’t have any to give and was impatient to move on. The quicker I found Norus and the stone, the faster I could go back. That was, if I could go back. Without any useful information and magic, I didn’t know how I was going to finish the job that had been inadvertently placed on me. Hopefully they could help me or at least point me in the right direction.

“Finding the stone is very important and I need your help. I was wondering if any of you or your scouts know or could find out about a man name Gairen Merigold and a ship called Marianne.”

“Is this where you will find the Sighyn stone?”

“I hope so. Shuron said that the man will board the ship and while at sea, the ship would hit a storm and capsized. No one survived it and that was the last location of the stone.”

Their lord nodded and stayed quiet in thought. After a while he closed his eyes and concentrated. He moved his head slowly from side to side. The movement was so slight that if I wasn't staring at him so intensely, I would not have noticed.

“We will help you on your mission. Loquis will accompany you in your search. Unfortunately, I can only provide you with one person. We have matters here that are equal, if not greater in importance and I cannot spare any more people to help you.” He then turned to the man in question. “I will let you sort out the details.”

Then he got up and made a line in the air. An opening appeared and he stepped through.

I was grateful that he would even lend one person to help me. I had feared that I would have to go through this alone.

“Before we proceed, there are a few things I need to take care of and you look in need of more rest.” Without waiting for my response, Loquis turned to Wolrik and said, “Please escort her to her cort.” He too made a line in the air and stepped through the opening.

“I could—”

“I am—”

We spoke at the same time after a few moments of awkward silence. I waited for him to go first and when it seemed like he was doing the same, I spoke up, but only to have both of us talking at the same time once again.

We both smiled at the silliness of it.

“I know the way back if you are busy,” I said when he motioned, with a tilt of his head, for me to go first.

“I have nothing pressing at the moment. I will escort you to your cort,” he said.

We were silent for most of the way. I took several secretive looks towards him, curious about the man from this timeline. He was younger than the Wolrik I knew. Though he was young in appearance, his disposition fitted a man of a mature age. He wore the face of a seasoned warrior, a man who knew and had seen too much. He seemed to be on edge, in a constant state of readiness as if an enemy was nearby, lurking somewhere—ready to strike. I wondered if it was either caused by their clan war, by the war with Keya, or by something else.

He caught me watching him. I blushed and smiled sheepishly.

“What was it that you were going to say to me?” I asked.

“I wanted to apologize for what I did before. I did not mean to hurt you. It is just that...” He hesitated, not knowing what else to say.

“I would have done the same if I were you. There is no need to apologize. I am, after all, a stranger here, who appeared to you out of nowhere. What reason would you have to trust me?”

“I knew you would not harm us.”

“Really? You sound very certain.”

“I am.”

“Then why did you attack me?”

“Just because I know this does not mean that I am right. It is my duty and all of our duties to protect our lord if he is threatened in any way. Especially now, since there have been several attempts on his life. We cannot afford to take any chances.”

“Then you did what you had to. I won’t blame you for doing your job, especially since I am a stranger here.”

“Regardless, I am sorry, Cass.”

I smiled up at him and said, “Apology accepted.”

But he still looked uncertain and guilty.

“I was wondering if you could do me a favor.” He nodded and I asked, “I was wondering if you could make me another knife.”

His eyebrows arched. “Another knife?”

“Yes. The first time we met—I mean the first time I met you—you gave me a knife. I kind of lost it but not by carelessness,” I added quickly in case he thought I didn’t appreciate his gift. “It’s a long story that I don’t want to go into. I was wondering if you can make me another one, or maybe if you have a spare lying around that I could borrow. I promise I won’t lose this one. Cross my heart,” I said and moved my hand in a crisscross motion in the area of my heart for emphasis.

His eyes crinkled as if amused. I couldn’t tell if he really was since his facial expression did not change. We stopped at the doorway to my cort. Out of nowhere, he held a knife in his hand. He flipped it and handed it to me with the handle end facing me. I smiled at him.

“Thank you.”

“Do you know how to use it?” he asked.

I nodded and smiled.

“Good-bye, Wolrik. It was nice meeting you again.”

I went in, not waiting for his reply. I leaned on the door for a while before turning to look out the window. He was still there, in the same spot I had left him, staring at the door. He then turned and walked away. I watched him until he disappeared around the corner. Then I waited another few minutes before grabbing the doorknob. In a blink of an eye, I found myself sitting cross-legged on a huge rock. Across from me, several feet away sat an elderly man cross-legged with his arms resting on them and his eyes closed in a meditative state. I looked at him and my surroundings with curiosity. He was bald with a white beard and dressed in a simple gray robe with a wide, long strip of cloth that was tied around his waist. His pants were of similar color and each pant leg was tied at the ankle. We were in an enclosed courtyard or a garden. Out in the distance, I could see traces of mountaintops peeking through the clouds and could hear the sound of waterfalls. Inside, we were surrounded by miniature landscapes.

There were several huge rocks with long jagged grooves in the shape of a mountain, flowing water and ponds that represented rivers and lakes. There was an abundance of trees, plants, and flowers placed around the area and a couple of small bridges, pavilions, and winding paths. We were sitting in one of the larger clearings. It looked to me as if we were in one of those Chinese gardens that I had seen pictures of from one of my Uncle Ned's travels when I was young.

"Concentrate, Cassiea."

I turned my attention back to the man across from me. His eyes were closed and he was as still as stone. If I had not heard him speak, I would have thought he was a statue.

"How do you know my name? And it is Cass, by the way."

It was strange how undisturbed I was by the fact that he knew my name, but then why shouldn't I be, since this was a dream. It had to be a dream even though, for the life of me, I could not understand why I would dream of this place or this man.

"One must meditate to clear the mind of impurities and ground the soul to the center of one's body before one can begin training," he said, ignoring my question.

My eyebrows went up at his weird philosophical words.

"I need to get back, so if you could just—OWW!" I exclaimed when a small pebble hit my forehead. "What the hell!"

"If you knew how to defend yourself, you could have avoided it."

"Well, good to know," I said while I got up from where I was sitting. Another small pebble came flying at me and this time I was able to dodge it.

"Cut that out!"

"Slight improvement, but still needs a lot of work."

"Listen—"

Before I could say any more, another pebble was thrown at me. Old or not, I would have loved to punch him just to make him stop throwing pebbles at me. But I had a feeling he wouldn't let me close enough to do anything to him. When the next one came my way, I was able to catch it and throw it back at him. He had the nerve to be insulted by my action. Well, he was older than me and my Uncle Ned did tell me to respect my elders. But I was being threatened and I had the right to defend myself. Well...to be honest, it was more for annoyance than defense. For some reason, I knew he wouldn't intentionally hurt me.

In an instant, he jumped up from where he was sitting and landed a few feet from me. Before my mind could even process the fact that he was in front of me, he started to move. I could feel the light taps of his fist then the palm of his hand, then his feet, then a leg and then his fist again on each part of my body. His movements were so fast that I couldn't see what he was doing; I could only feel them landing on my body. If he had used his full force, I was certain all those points of impact would have hurt or, much worse, broken bones. I kept retreating while he kept advancing. I tried to use my arms in a poor attempt to block his blows, but he effortlessly flung them away. He was teasing me by using some form of martial arts on me.

I was annoyed and I had had enough of his games. I stood my ground and just waited it out, until he got tired or bored. It was not like I could do anything else. It didn't take long. As soon as I stopped moving backwards, he stopped. He then walked back and sat cross-legged on the rock.

"One must meditate to clear the mind of impurities and ground the soul to the center of one's body before one could begin training," he said again.

I looked heavenwards and thought to myself, 'Why me?' before I slowly walked back to sit on my rock and mimicked his position. I gave a huge sigh, a small show of my annoyance and displeasure, which he ignored, before I closed my eyes and concentrated on clearing my mind.

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Loquis found him in the Runier deep in thought. When Wolrik noticed him, he turned and started

to look at the display of crystals that were on the shelf. They had known each other since childhood and he could tell that what little time he spent with their visitor had rattled him. Loquis was a little amused at the fact that, after all this time, his friend finally found an interest in something other than his duties. It had not gone unnoticed the way he hovered around Cass when she fainted. And how he stood in the shadows, thinking no one was aware of his hiding place, as he watched over and protected her while she rested from her faint.

If that was not convincing enough, then he was absolutely positive of his friend's feelings for her when he blocked her from trying to harm their lord, or so he thought. What Cass did not realize was that if he had not done that, their lord would have killed her. He would not have saved her if he did not have feelings for her. Loquis was glad. Lately he noticed his friend was troubled. Something had happened when he was on his mission. He was their spy in Keya's court. He was there to gain Keya's trust and positioned himself as close to her as possible in order to collect as much information from her so they could find a way to destroy her before she destroyed them. Ever since he came back, he looked glum and dejected, as if at war with his own heart. The only thing that seemed to pull him out of it a little was when Cass appeared. In such a short time, she had influenced him. Hopefully for the better, and maybe to get his friend back to the person that he knew.

"I know you wanted to go with her." When Wolrik did not answer, he sighed and went on. "Why did you not ask our lord for this assignment?"

"I have other obligations. You know that," he said without looking at him. He was still concentrating on the crystals on the shelves.

"I had another talk with our lord and convinced him that I switched places with you."

Wolrik stood still for a few moments before turning around to face his friend. "Why the sudden change in plans? Did you have a vision?"

"No, but if I were to look, I have a feeling it will not be me who helps her."

"I do not understand."

"When I asked our lord to look again at Cass' mission, he saw, as he did before, the many outcomes of her succeeding. But when I asked him to look into mine, the success rate was low. In most incidences, we have failed."

Wolrik was surprised. Their lord had the gift of seeing the pareal. How could he have seen two different outcomes for two people going in the same direction?

"How is that possible? Did he do a cleansing?"

"There was no time. We both feel that someone is tampering with our visions. I did not see Cass appear before us. I just sensed something was different—something shifted—like a wrinkle or a disturbance. Our lord felt the same."

"It must be Keya, but how is this possible? How could she have known?"

"My guess is it might be this Norus Cass spoke of."

He nodded in agreement. "Changing our strategy might change things. How many people know of this?"

"Only the three of us. We will have to keep it this way as long as possible."

Wolrik went to the opal and touched the side of it with his hand. An aerial map of where they were appeared before them. Then the map started to move slowly to the left to view the area in that vicinity. After a while it stopped.

"I will meet you and Cass here. There should not be anyone in this area. We best go on foot, no magic to trace us."

Loquis nodded in agreement. He held out his arm and said, "Until then."

Wolrik held out his arm and grasped Loquis' by the elbow and he in turn did the same. "Until then."

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## Chapter 6

I woke up to see Loquis hovering above me. I was confused at first but then I slowly remembered where I was. I was inside my cort, lying on the floor next to the door. I remembered I was going to open the door when I started to dream. With his help, I got up and leaned on the wall. I felt like I just woke up from a long sleep.

“How long have I been asleep?”

“I assume for a couple of hours now. Are you all right?”

I gave him a smile of assurance. “I’m fine.” I noticed his change of clothing. He was wearing something that belonged in the eighteenth century. I thought that was odd until I remembered that I was not in my timeline but in the past. “Are we ready to go?”

“In a couple of minutes. First, you have to change.” He motioned his arm out to me. It was covered with a fabric material with lots of lace and folds in a pastel colors. I slightly backed away, knowing I wasn’t going to like it.

“What is that?”

He smiled at me. “You will have to wear this.”

I looked down at myself and questioned him even though I knew the answer. But I had to ask anyway, just in case there was a very slight chance I was wrong. “What is wrong with what I am wearing?” Before I left home to meet the elders, I had put on their “work” clothes or their camouflage clothes they wore when they were out in the forest.

“You will stand out too much with what you are wearing. You need to blend in and not be noticed.”

“I can pretend to be a man.”

He smiled at that and looked me up and down. “I assure you no one will mistake you for a man even dressed up as one. Your hair will be a problem.”

I touched my hair and looked at him in surprise. “What’s wrong with my hair?”

“It is not long enough.”

“It is not that short. It’s past my shoulders,” I said.

“In this era, women wore their hair longer. You also have a feather in your hair.”

“Well that’s easy. I could just take it off.”

I was about to do so when he stopped me.

“Leave it. We will use magic to fix your hair, which I will help you with later. For now, please change into these.”

He held up an over abundance of cloth on his arms to me. It looked heavy and uncomfortable to wear. I remembered from history books that in the olden days, women’s dresses were heavy and hard to maneuver. I grudgingly went to change while he waited at the door. While I was trying to make heads or tails of the dress, I was surprised that it wasn’t as heavy as it looked. And the way it was constructed made it easy to move around in. I could run in it with no difficulty and get out of it if I needed to. Inside was a very light lining of a simple pants and a shirt. They must had gone into our world often and had to leave in a hurry.

We walked for several minutes in silence. I had a lot of things I needed to discuss with him. Most importantly, I wanted to warn him of his death, though how would one go about telling another person about that?

“Loquis, what year is this? I mean, from what you and I are wearing, I could guess but I just wanted to confirm.”

“We are in the eighteenth century.”

“What year are we in?”

“It is for the best if you do not know too much about the past while you are here. We are better off not knowing about our future.”

“But don’t you want to know if you will survive the war with Keya?”

He stopped walking and turned around to face me. “It is very tempting to want to know ones fate, but it is best to walk the path without knowing what is up ahead. Besides, you are here. I believe we all know the outcome.”

“You are right. What I don’t understand is how you prefer not to know about the future when you do it all the time.” When he looked at me curiously, I went on. “You see visions of the future. Isn’t that tempting fate?”

“It is complicated. I do see images of the future, but I do not act upon them. Vision, in its simplest term, is similar to a person viewing a painting, of one moment in time, and you have to guess what happened before and what happened afterward. Each time these images come through, it is very tempting to want to change the present to meet the desired future. So you plot your way to make sure the outcome is what you want. You become so focused on the outcome that you forget about everything and everyone around you and make things worse than they should be. It is better if you just pace yourself and prepare for the coming future. One person’s actions affect other people’s lives around them.”

“I don’t understand. You have this gift. You have an opportunity to know what the future might hold and yet you prefer not knowing or not doing anything about it.”

“I know you do not understand and I hope one day you will. You are a stranger to our world and you have not lived as long as we have. To us, your people are still young and foolhardy. Not unlike us when we were at that age. Knowing one’s future can be a curse. It is best to leave things as is. Learn from our mistakes, Cass. There are always consequences when someone tries to change the future or the past. And so, I ask of you to promise that during your time here with us, do not try to change anything that should not be changed. Do not reveal anything that should not be revealed. History is already being rewritten when you stepped foot into our timeline.”

“But there is so much that needed to be said and so much that needed to change,” I told him.

I could not help but think of all the people who would have been alive if they had only known what was to happen.

I looked up when his hand touched mine.

“Cass, we cannot always save everyone. Life is fragile no matter how careful we are and how much we try to protect it. Life is meant to be lived not to struggle through and not to ponder over.”

“Loquis, I—” I turned at the sound and took out the knife to be ready for what was coming.

Wolrik appeared out of the darkness of the forest. I relaxed my stand.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

He stopped and looked surprised. “Loquis did not tell you?”

“My apologies, Cass, there has been a change of plans. Wolrik will be joining you in my place.”

“Why? Did something happen?”

“Nothing for you to be concerned about. There is something that our lord needs me to do.”

I looked at him, trying to read his expression. I knew, even though he wouldn’t admit it. Their lord was wearing combat gear and now Wolrik was replacing Loquis.

“You are going to confront Keya,” I said.

He did not give a hint of surprise or acknowledgment and said nothing. Wolrik was just as steadfast about not giving anything away. I frowned at their secrecy. This was getting annoying.

“Never mind. I have already told you what will happen to her, but be careful anyway.”

He patted my hand and said, “Do not worry; I will be careful. The two of you should also do the same. I will see you when this is all over.”

I watched him leave, still wondering if I should tell him about his future. I owed it to him. But as I watched him leave, I realized I could not face him, at least not now. When he was gone from my line of

sight, I turned around to face Wolrik. Even in this timeline he still had a way of making me feel things that I didn't want to feel. At that moment, the way he looked at me—looked like he wanted to grab hold of me and never let go. My heart fluttered and my stomach stirred. I looked away.

“We should go. I don't know how far ahead Norus has gotten. I hope we are not too late,” I said as I stepped forward.

“Cass, you are going the wrong way.”

I stopped. My face was flushed with embarrassment. Fidgeting over my blunder, I swiped my hand on my hair and realized that Loquis left without fixing my hair.

“Do you, by any chance, know how to fix my hair?”

“Is there something wrong with it?” He frowned.

“Loquis said it might be a problem when we are in my world.”

He looked carefully at my hair and nodded in agreement. “He is right. I will fix it for you.” He came over to me, lifted his hands, and swept down my hair.

When he was done, he looked surprised.

“What? Did something go wrong? Is my hair okay?” I was getting worried and started patting my head to try to feel for any problems.

“Your hair is fine.” He shook his head.

“Then what is it?” I asked when he was still looking at me strangely.

“The feather. It is from a Prunira.”

“Yes. You gave it to me. I mean the you in my timeline, that is.”

“Preina,” he whispered.

“Preina? What is that? Another name for Prunira?”

He looked at me with a dash of curiosity and surprise before shaking his head. I was unsure if he was replying to my question or trying to shake away some inner conflict.

“It...it means...” He hesitated, unsure of what to say. “Destined.”

I looked at him expectantly. He was still too distracted with his own thoughts to notice. What was so damn special about this feather?

“Why is everyone so obsessed with this feather? Is there some hidden meaning in having a feather from them? Is it cursed or something to that effect? Maybe I should take it off.”

He grabbed my wrist before I could pull it off. I looked at him, surprised at his reaction. He let go in an instance.

“Forgive me. I assure you there are no negative outcomes of wearing their feather. Prunira are a very rare birds. They are very hard to find and they do not give up their feathers easily.”

I narrowed my eyes. “That's what everyone is telling me, but why do I have this feeling that there is more to it than just a very rare bird?”

“It is a surprise and nothing more. They are very special birds to us.”

“Like a mascot?”

“Mascot?”

“Yes, you know, something that represents you or your people as a group, like a shield or a crest.”

“It is something along that line.” He moved his hand down my hair where the feather lay. “You need not worry from now on. I have made it so only the two of us will notice it.”

I smiled up at him. “Thanks, it was getting annoying to have to explain the feather to everyone I meet.”

He smiled and changed the topic. “I think we should start with the ship.”

“The ship?”

“Yes, the one that Merigold will be on. It will be easier to look for the ship than the man.”

“That is if Norus has not found him before then.”

“I do not believe he has found him. I have been quietly making some inquiries. So far, no one has heard of a man named Norus.”



“He could have come here without letting anyone know.”

“It is a possibility, but highly unlikely since traveling to the past takes tremendous amount of magic and it also leaves a trail. I have detected him coming here but I have not detected a second trail of him leaving.”

So that meant he had not found the man or the stone. If he had, then he would have gone back. That was reassuring. I was afraid I might be too late.

“Will you be able to keep track and detect it later if he does go back?”

“Yes, I also know his magic signature. If we are in close proximity to him, I will know where he is when he uses his magic.”

“How far can you detect his magic?”

“About a couple miles.”

Suddenly an opening appeared. On the other side was an empty bar where Xena stood waiting. She was as surprised as we were to see her. I smiled as I recognized another person I knew. She was wearing a very plain brown-and-white peasant dress. It was clean, but well worn. Her hair was in a simple bun and her sleeves rolled up.

I was so happy to see another familiar face that I threw my arms around her and gave her a huge hug.

“Xena! I didn’t expect to see you here.”

She pushed me away and looked at me in confusion. “Do I know you?”

“Oh, that’s right. You don’t know me, at least not right now.”

She turned to Wolrik with a questioning look on her face. “Loquis had asked me to lead him here. I did not expect you or your...friend.”

“It is critical that no one knows about our presence here. We are trying to move undetected as long as possible. My guess, Loquis is helping us along.” Wolrik said.

She nodded in understanding and placed two drinks in front of us.

“Do you know of a ship called the Marianne?”

She tilted her head in thought. “I have heard of it. It is one of the ships from the Americas. I do not believe it is docked here. Let me make some inquiries. Until then, the two of you should stay out of sight.”

He nodded in agreement. “Is there a room free?”

She nodded and took us to a room at the far corner of her establishment.

The room was bare except for the few necessities; a bed, a chair, a small table and a tall end table with a bowl and pitcher on top. After hours cooped up in the small room, unable to leave for fear we might be discovered by Norus, I became restless. A couple of times I started to pace back and forth and then I would sit at the table next to the window, drumming my fingers. It was annoying that Wolrik could remain still and calm, aloof and distant while I was anxious and unsettled. I had too much time on my hands and could not help but think of things that I didn’t want to think about. I wished I had his disposition—strong, firm, and in control.

I was worried that I was going to fail. I did not know what to do. My head was a blank slate every time I thought about the next step. I didn’t know what or how I was going to handle things if I failed and Norus got the stone before me. I wasn’t trained for this and was angry with all of them: Shuron, the elders, and Xena, for not warning me. I was angry that they did not trust me enough to tell me what was going on and to thrust me into something as important as this with no instruction as to how to proceed. If they sent me into a situation blind, how was I to have a chance of succeeding? Finding the Sighya stone was very important. If Norus was as evil and as strong as Keya and Nara and if he had this stone that would prevent him from dying, then we, the Elvains and humans, would be doomed. I was not cut out to have such a heavy burden on my shoulders. And I didn’t want to learn how.

I also could not stop thinking about Wolrik. I was too aware of him, disturbed by his nearness. It

was disconcerting to feel this way and it made me angry with myself. I had already made up my mind not to get involved with him or anyone else, at least for a while. I had already pushed him away—the Wolrik in my timeline. But, as I thought about our kiss, I finally admitted that those disturbing feelings that I had had for him since the very first day I met him—the feelings that I couldn't put a name to—were attraction. I was attracted to him. For some reason, I was drawn to him like a moth to a flame and I didn't know how to stop it. But I had to. I didn't have the strength within me to have another important person in my life leaving me. If I didn't have these conflicting feelings for him, maybe I would have enjoyed his company. Since we had stepped into the room, we had not spoken a word. He seemed to be in deep concentration and unaware that I was even there. I guessed the attraction was only one-sided. But then again, he did kiss me back then, in the forest. That had to count for something.

If I could stop worrying about this mission and my attraction to him, maybe I would be able to enjoy this timeline and view it in a different light from how I was seeing it now; an unsettling picture of life in this century. There were dozens of buildings clustered and squeezed in one next to the other with no gaps in between. Carriages and crates overflowing with foods and trinkets, and masses of people of all stations, were packed into the small streets like sardines. The stench of rotten fish and another unknown odor filtered in through the unopened window.

If I weren't so caught up in worrying about the mission and my feelings towards Wolrik, I would have enjoyed observing the people in this century, to study them and find out everything I could about them and this place where they lived. I was always fascinated by history, specifically the history of people's nature and how it shaped their society, and vice versa. I think it had some to do with my Uncle Ned and his many adventures traveling around the world. It had started me thinking of what it would be like to visit different countries, experiencing different cultures and ways of life. It may also have had to do with people themselves. When my parents died, I felt I lost a sense of my identity and my place in this world. I couldn't fit in and I could never understand the people around me, the way they thought and acted. I started to observe them, how they interact with each other and their environment. And how their place in society had influenced them.

Even in my dreams were disturbing me. I was plagued with dreaming of an old man, Master Xin, in a garden with the sound of waterfalls in the distance. I dreamed of this place that night and every night afterward. While I was in the garden, he taught me a form of martial arts. I would follow him as he moved in choreographed sequences. Like a dancer, slow, steady, centered, graceful, and precise. I would sometimes practice on my own while he looked on. And other times he would put me through a grueling, intense exercise that strengthened my body both internally and externally. He was always there, teaching me as if readying me for battle. I had asked him once why I was here but his answer always eluded me when I woke up.

It was the next morning when Xena received information about the ship. She said that it was in Boston ready to set sail to the Caribbean. Her contacts didn't know anyone by the name of Gairen Merigold or Norus.

“We should start with the ship. Hopefully this will be the day Merigold will be boarding,” Wolrik said.

“How are we going to get there in time? It would take us several days to get to Boston. By then, the ship would be long gone. It is not like you have airplanes.”

Both of them looked at me questionably after my last statement.

“Never mind. What are we going to do now?”

“You will see,” he said before getting up.

Xena got up to follow him. I stood hesitating for a moment. This was it. My heart raced and I linked my hands together and held them tightly to prevent them from shaking. I was nervous, scared, and worried. It was starting. A mission I couldn't fail. All of my insecurities rose and rec havoc inside me. I bit my lip and clamped down on my emotions. *Don't think. Do not think. Just move.* I repeated to myself over and over again. I took a long deep breath and slowly exhaled and moved to follow them.

## Chapter 7

He led us to the back room where there was a small desk filled with papers and books piled one on top of the other. She went to one wall and pressed on it. A small click sounded before the wall opened. It was filled with an assortment of different-sized boxes. She took one out and handed it to Wolrik. He opened it and held out a round crystal the size of his palm.

“Is that an opal? It is smaller than the one in the Runier,” I said.

He held it up for me to see. “Yes, this will give us just enough magic to lead us to where we need to go.”

He concentrated on the crystal for a few seconds. When the crystal started to glow, he lifted his other hand into the air and made an opening. Another bar appeared and another Elvain was waiting for us. He was not surprised to see us. Again, we stepped into a bar. Wolrik nodded to the man. He, in turn, nodded to us. There was no introduction; we didn’t stay long enough for one. Now that we knew where the ship was, we were eager to find it and the man with the stone. As before, the streets smelled of rotten fish and other indistinguishable odor. It was busy, noisy, and crowded. I almost got ran over by a carriage that was going faster than it should have been in the crowd of pedestrians. Wolrik pulled me away in time and held my hand as we barreled our way to the docks.

When we found the ship, we asked a workman if he knew the names of the passengers. He referred us to the captain. The captain was kind enough to let us see the manifest. Wolrik had asked me to stay behind and I gladly complied. I stood at the railing watching ships set sail as others docked. I watched the bustling workers prepare crates to be loaded on board and people milling about. That was when I noticed Pix. I immediately ducked when she turned to look in my direction. I reasoned with myself that it couldn’t be her. How was it possible for her to be here?

I slowly peeked over the railing, but she was gone. I searched through the crowd and spotted her again. She looked a little different from the Pix of my timeline. Here, her hair was long, her face was fuller, and her mouth and nose were slightly larger than what I remembered. And, she was boarding the same ship that I was on. I was not sure why, but I followed her. She went down the stairs and into a long corridor. I quickly turned my back to her and slowly walked away when she turned again in my direction. I prayed that she didn’t notice that I was following her. Then I heard a knock on the door. I didn’t dare turn around. Then came the sound of the door opening.

“What are you doing here?” a male voice asked.

I didn’t hear a reply, just the door closing. I slowly turned to see that I was the only one in the hallway. I quickly went back upstairs to look for Wolrik. When he saw my expression, he quickly came over.

“Is something the matter?”

“Did your lord ask others to help us?”

“Highly unlikely. But if he did, he would have informed us. Why do you ask?”

“I just saw Pix.”

He pulled me to the side, away from prying eyes. His face changed from concerned to alert. “Are you referring to Pixiena?”

“Yes. Why are you upset? She is here to help us, isn’t she?”

“I’m afraid not, Cass. She is Keya’s apprentice.”

“What? That can’t be! Unless she changed sides afterward,” I said.

“What do you mean?”

“She has the gift of seeing the pareal. She was there in the Runier with us when we tried to send Shuron back to the past.”

“I know her well, Cass, and I can assure you, she has not and would never change sides. That must

be the reason you came here instead of Shuron. And if that is the case, we definitely need to retrieve the stone before they do.”

“I followed her downstairs.”

“You what?”

“I followed her downstairs.”

“Cass, listen to me, Pixiena is a very dangerous person. I do not want you to be alone with her.”

“Don’t worry. She didn’t see me following her. She knocked on someone’s door. He was surprised to see her. Do you think she found Merigold?”

“It might be him or it might be Norus.”

“Do you think Norus went to her when he came here?”

“If Pixiena is here, then I am certain he went to Keya first before looking for Merigold. And she had asked Pixiena to follow him. I checked the manifest; the man we are seeking definitely bought a ticket on this ship.”

“Does the captain know if he is here yet?”

“No. Let us hope that he is and that we are able to find him in time before they do.”

We stayed above the ship keeping an eye out in case Pix or Norus made a hasty escape off of it—a signal to us that one of them had the stone. When the ship set sail, Wolrik wanted me to show him where I last saw her. When we were at the door, he pressed his palm on it and closed his eyes.

“I don’t sense any presence or any use of magic in here,” he said before opening the door.

The room was very small, just big enough to fit a small square table, chair and a bed that touched from one end of the wall to the other. The room was clean and undisturbed as if no one had occupied it yet. We started searching the place. It didn’t take long since there weren’t any personal items in the room.

Since our search bore no clues, we decided to go above to see if we could find the man named Merigold. For most of the day, Wolrik discreetly conversed with other passengers on board trying to find out if one of them was him or knew of him. We were disappointed each time by their answer. It was getting late. The sun was starting to set and we still had not found the man in question. I became worried that Pix and Norus had found the man, took the stone and were long gone since we had not seen either of them also. Wolrik assured me they hadn’t. He did not detect any magic used nor boats missing, an indication of their success at obtaining the stone. It was not until the late evening when the man in question introduced himself to us by accident. The weather had changed suddenly. Clouds appeared, the wind grew stronger and the ship rocked even more than before. I slowly walked over to the side of the ship, getting a little seasick. I remember someone had said that it helped to look out over the horizon. I was but a foot away from my objective when the ship suddenly listed to the right. I would have landed hard on the deck if someone had not grabbed onto and steadied me.

“Are you all right, madam?”

“Yes, thank you.” I smiled at him, grateful that he was there in time to break my fall.

The ship dipped again and he held on to me again to keep me steady. He then led me into a small room and sat me down. When the ship rocked again, I closed my eyes and took a deep breath.

“The storm will pass. I have sailed many times and know a little bit about the temperament of the weather. I can assure you that this will pass,” he said when he saw my expression.

All I could do was smile at him. I could not tell him that I had prior knowledge about this ship going down by a storm. The door swung opened to reveal Wolrik standing there. He looked menacing and ready for a fight. He looked to the man first, then to me. His brows creased with concern when he saw my face. He quickly came over and knelt in front of me with worried eyes.

“Do not fret, sir. She is just a little seasick. She will be fine in a few moments,” the man assured him.

When I saw how worried he looked, I gave Wolrik a smile and told him that I would be all right. His expression didn’t change as he took my hand in his. There was slight warmth coming from his to

mine and in an instant, my nausea subsided and I was back to normal.

I was about to thank him when he lightly squeezed my hand and gave his head a little tilt. My eyes followed his direction to the man who helped me. I did not take notice of his appearance until now. He was very handsome. He had long brown hair that he tied at the nape of his neck. He looked Spanish in origin and had a wicked smile on his face. I couldn't help but smile back at him. The way he stood and the clothing he wore told me that he came from wealth. Wolrik got up and my attention turned to him. They were of similar build, slim figures with broad shoulders. However Wolrik was taller by several inches.

"Thank you for assisting my wife, Mr..." he said.

I was glad he blocked me from view when he turned to the man because my mouth dropped open from shock. We never discussed how we were going to explain our relationship or our cover story.

"Merigold, Gairen Merigold I am glad that I could be of service."

I gave a small gasp and my hand moved to my mouth to stop myself from shouting out with relief and joy that we finally found him. I was again grateful that Wolrik blocked me from the man.

"I am Logan Ashford and this is my wife, Cassandra."

Mr. Merigold moved slightly to look my way and nodded to me. "You look better now, madam. I see that you have gotten your color back."

"Yes, thank you again for your help." I smiled gratefully.

"It is the least I could do for a beautiful damsel in distress," he said as he gave me his wicked smile again.

I could not help but blush before lowering my head. It was a rarity for someone to complement me and I wasn't used to it.

"Mr. Merigold," Wolrik interrupted—none too happy about the exchange and it was noted in his voice. "If you will excuse us, I would like to take my wife to our room to rest."

"Yes, of course." He turned to me and said, "Until we meet again." He nodded to me, then to Wolrik before leaving.

Wolrik was frowning at the retreating man even after he disappeared from our sight. I called out his name to get his attention. When he didn't respond, I lightly touched his hand. He turned to me then. He seemed worried and I didn't know why.

"Is something wrong?"

He shook his head and said, "He seemed very taken with you."

My eyes widened in surprise. Then I smiled. "I think he was just flirting. Nothing more."

"I do not want you to be alone with him. I do not trust him," he said and squeezed our locked hands to emphasize his warning.

I looked at him in surprise.

"We are on a ship. What could he possibly do to me?"

"There are a lot of hiding places and rooms that people rarely go to. It will be easy for him to take you there and I will not be able to find you in time."

"You can't be serious, Wolrik."

"I have met many men like him." He cupped my face with his other hand; a look that I couldn't read went across his face. "Promise me you will stay away from him, Cass."

Magic or not, I was able to take care of myself, but I didn't want him to worry. He looked so concerned that I nodded my head in agreement. He looked relieved. There was a moment of silence as we looked at each other. He was very close and I could smell his scent. My lips parted a little and my heart began to race as I watched the intensity in his eyes. Then it was gone. His whole demeanor changed. He quickly stepped back, away from me, and let go of my hand as if it was on fire. He was back to his old self, aloof and distant. I was confused by his attitude and I couldn't understand why.

"Stay here," he commanded. "I am going to follow him and hopefully he will lead me back to his room," he said before leaving me alone.

I hurried outside but he was already gone. I put my hands to my hips and scowled. Who did he think I was? A helpless idiot? Weren't we supposed to be partners? Better yet, wasn't he supposed to work for me since I was responsible for finding the stone? It was true that I didn't really want the responsibility and I didn't know anything about retrieving the stone from someone while dodging Norus and Pix, but give a girl some credit for trying. I was not going to just sit by and let him do all the work.

As if someone had heard my mental rant, I spotted Norus and Pix going down a flight of stairs. We had not seen them since we had set sail, which was weird since this was a ship and there were only so many places a person could wander. I ducked back into the room when they turned to look behind them. I followed them as they went down. They went into the same room that I saw her go into earlier. I didn't know if I should stay here and wait or leave. Leaving sounded better than sitting out in the hallway all night, but what happened if they disappeared on us again? I was still contemplating what to do when someone called my name from behind me. I screamed in surprise since I was distracted and hadn't heard anyone coming up behind me. Luckily Wolrik was fast and covered my mouth with his hand before the scream could be heard. When he saw me calm down, he slowly let go and led me to another hallway, then into a room. This room was bigger than the one Norus and Pix were staying in. There was enough room for us to move around without bumping into each other. There was a bed at one side of the wall and a table on the other.

"What are you doing there?" he asked me. His expression told me that he wasn't too happy about it.

"I saw them and went to follow them."

"I told you to stay where you were."

"I was going to, but like I said before, I saw them and I followed them. I figured since we haven't seen them the whole day, I should not let this opportunity pass by."

"Next time, I want you to do nothing. Do you understand me?"

My eyebrows rose, I crossed my arms on my chest and glared at him.

"Listen. I may be new at this whole thing and I don't know how best to proceed in getting the stone but I am not helpless. Quit being so sexist, I can help."

He glared back at me in return, and then took a step forward, crowding me as he looked down at me. "It is because you are new to this that you should not do anything that might get yourself hurt. I do not know Norus, but I can assure you, if he is anything like Pixiena, he—the both of them—will not hesitate to kill you."

I had to crank my neck back to see his face. I knew he was trying to intimidate me, but it wasn't working. I stood my ground.

"How am I supposed to learn if you don't give me a chance? Don't you think it is better that I learn and be useful than just sit around and be useless? You cannot always be by my side to protect me. And two people working together are better than one person working alone."

"I do not want to see you hurt."

"Well that is one thing we agree on."

"Good. Then you stay out of it and let me do this."

"No. Either we do this together or I go at this alone."

"You will not. I am warning you, Cass. If you try anything I will tie you up and lock you in here."

I made a sound of frustration and anger at his words. Who did he think he was? Yes, I was in a century where men thought women were weak but I was not from here and he had better remember that. I grabbed his shirt with both hands and pulled until our faces were an inch away.

"Listen, you male chauvinistic pig, you do that and I swear I'm going to make you pay. Mark my words, Wolrik. You do not want to mess with me!"

Then it happened. One minute we were arguing and the next minute, he grabbed me and kissed me. I was shocked at first and on instinct I wanted to pull away. But his hold was firm and his kiss felt so

good and I had wanted him to kiss me again. So I wrapped my arms around his neck and deepened the kiss. My mind was full of sensations. The feel of his mouth against mine. The feel of our bodies molded together and his hands on my hair and back. It felt so good being in his arms that I couldn't stop. I didn't want it to end. He lifted me into his arms and carried me to bed.

I was already awake when I felt him stirring behind me. I turned, cradled my head on my hand and looked down at him

"I thought you didn't like me."

He was amused by my words. His thumb brushed my lips, and then he slowly glided his hand down the side of my body, stopping at my thigh.

"I wanted you from the first moment I met you."

"But you look—I mean you didn't seem like you wanted me."

"I was trying very hard not to."

"Why?"

He smoothed his hand down my hair and toyed with the feather that was tied to it.

"I am positive that we know each other well in your timeline because you wear the feather I gave you. Yet you act as if we are strangers. From the time you came here until now, you seemed cautious of me, distant. Something must have happened between us to make you act this way. I wanted to give you time and maybe you would let me know what had happened between us."

I was silent, unsure of what to say. Needing some distance, I sat up, took his shirt that was on the floor next to my feet. I slowly put it on before getting up and walked a few steps away from him. In my timeline, I was too stunned by our first kiss to think straight. I had said some things that I shouldn't have and I had hurt him. He had the right to know my reason for pushing him away. I owed him that much. I turned back to him. He had put on his pants, or breeches, as they were called here, while he waited. I told him about my parents and my uncle's death. I told him about Von and my pain of losing him. He seemed to understand and stayed quiet as he listened to me talk and grieve. Then I told him of that day we kissed and my reaction to it.

"I'm afraid, Wolrik. Everyone that I love is gone. I wanted to keep you at a distance so I won't be hurt again. I don't think I could handle it if you left too."

He walked over to me and pulled me into his arms.

"Do not think like that, Cass."

"How could I not? What assurance do you have that you will not leave me like the others?"

"I am afraid I cannot promise I will live forever, just as you cannot promise me the same. I can only promise you, that as long as I am living, I will always be with you. I will never leave you and I will never let you go. I love you, Cass."

"How can you say that? You don't even know me."

He lifted my chin to look at him. "I know enough. I know enough to take a chance with you. I may not know how long we will be together, but I will make sure that each day that we are together counts. I hope one day you will feel the same way I do."

I wiped my tears away and laughed lightly, not wanting to hear any more. So I changed the subject.

"Wouldn't it be great if there was a spell or some type of magic that would bring someone back to life? The Sighya stone can make a person immortal. You would think with all this magic, there would be one to bring someone back to life."

"Who would you bring back?"

"Von."

"Is your love for him that great?"

"I owe him. I think more than anyone else. He should not have died."

He quietly studied me for a moment before saying, "We need to rest."

He led me to bed but we didn't sleep, we made love until it was almost dawn. And, we slept only

for a little while before he slowly pulled me back to awareness. I woke to his soft touch and light kisses. When we finally slept again, I dreamed of Master Xin and his training. It was noon before we finally got up and dressed. I was grinning when I replayed our time in bed in my mind. I blushed when he caught me. He pulled me into his arms, letting me have a moment of privacy without actually leaving the room. After a while, I lifted my head up to look at him and smiled. He pushed my head back down and kissed the top of it.

“I want you even though I am exhausted. It is as if last night and this morning never happened. Why is that, Herina?”

I looked up at him again. Though I did not say it, I felt the same way. He pushed my head back down again.

“Do not look at me like that, Cass. You are tempting me to take you back to bed.”

“Why don’t we?” I asked and tried to lift my head, but he kept me still.

“You forget that we have a mission.”

I stiffened. I had forgotten. Which reminded me of our argument. I let go of him and walked to the other side of the room and leaned against a wall. I didn’t think either of us could talk coherently if we were too close to each other.

“I want to help.”

He was frowning and was about to say something when I held my hand up. “I know you are concerned for me, but if you could just think logically, you will see that you need my help. And, I am not taking no for an answer. Either we work together or we work alone. You cannot stop me. I promise I will be careful and I will listen to you since you know what you are doing, just as long as you do not shut me out.”

He stared at me, his expression unreadable.

“You will do as I say,” he said. It was more of a command than a question.

“I will promise, as long as you let me help.”

“I will agree to your terms.”

I smiled at him with satisfaction, glad that he was being reasonable. “Then, it is a deal,” I said as I held out my hand to shake on our agreement.

In two steps, he towered over me and trapped me between his arms. I looked up to see the fire in his eyes. My heart skipped in response. I opened my mouth to say something when his swept over mine and gave me a quick, hard possessive kiss before letting go. I looked up to see him looking down at me smiling. “We have a deal.”



## Chapter 8

When we were up on the deck, we spotted Pix and Norus talking to Merigold. Wolrik's jaw clenched. He did not look happy about the situation. I felt the same, but somehow I felt it was for two different reasons. Wolrik placed my hand in the crook of his arm and led me over to them. When Pix saw him, she gave him a devilish grin and looked him up and down seductively. Though it was clear from her facial expression that she knew him, she did not say a word about it when Merigold introduced us all. They, like us, used different names and pretended to be husband and wife, Sashia and Philip Thortain. She arched an eyebrow when Merigold introduced me as Wolrik's wife. Throughout our conversation, she did not disguise the fact that Wolrik was the center of her attention. Norus didn't seem to care about her flirtatious ways, though I didn't think he would, considering their relationship was an act. Merigold, amused and intrigued by her actions, kept a steady, neutral conversation going. I was fuming inside and hoped that it did not show on my face. Wolrik, oblivious to her ways, also maintained a steady conversation.

It seemed none of us wanted to leave Merigold's side as we walked around the ship and talked for the rest of the day. I stayed quiet through it all. After a couple of hours I became restless and my jealousy did not abate. I needed a distraction or maybe to get away from all the chattering and Pix's insatiable attention to Wolrik and his indifference. The day was getting late and the wind was picking up. I walked a couple of steps ahead to get a better look out at the horizon.

"It will be a clear sky tonight."

I turned to see Merigold behind me. He must have seen my confusion as he elaborated.

"You look worried. I assume it is because of your seasickness when the weather turned for the worse. I want to assure you that there won't be any storms. It will be a smooth ride tonight."

I smiled at him, touched by his concern. "Thank you," I said.

I realized this would be a perfect time to get some information from him about the stone, but my mind was drawing a blank at what to say or where to start the conversation. I realized he was looking at me waiting for a reply.

"I'm sorry. Did you say something?"

He smiled at me, giving me an assurance that he was not offended by my lack of attention. "I wanted to know if it is your first time visiting Port Royal."

I frowned in thought. Port Royal? Was that where Wolrik had said we were going? I gave a hesitant nod.

"Yes, it is. Have you been there before?"

"Yes, many times. It is very lovely this time of the year. You and your husband will enjoy it immensely."

He turned and took a slight glance at the three of them before turning back to me. "I should head back to my cabin. It has been a long day." He gave a light kiss on the back of my hand before walking away.

I watched him go down the stairs and then turned to see Wolrik still talking to the other two. I did not hesitate and followed the man down the stairs. I made note of where his room was and quickly left. I was relieved that nothing went wrong and he didn't see me following him. I was going up the stairs when Wolrik found me.

He was upset and led me to our room.

"I told you not to go anywhere alone with him," he said.

"I didn't. I was following him to find out where his room was."

"I already know where he is staying. If you recall, I had followed him yesterday."

"Right. When you left me. You should have told me that you knew."

“You did not ask.”

“Well, if you recall this morning, we agreed to work together.”

“Yes, I do remember our agreement.”

“If we are partners then I didn’t have to ask. You should have told me everything you know.”

“You promised to do what I say.”

“I did.”

“I told you not to be alone with him.”

“I wasn’t. I may have been speaking to him alone, but I was definitely not alone with him. You were all there, a few steps away.”

“I meant when you followed him.”

I crossed my arms over my chest and glared at him. “I was not with him. As you’ve said before, I was following him. I was a few feet away from him without him knowing. How can that possibly be constituted as ‘being with him’ when I am not at his side and he does not even know I was there?”

“You know very well what I meant. But just to clarify, I do not want you to follow him. I do not want you to be alone with him. I do not want you to speak with him alone. I do not want you to go into a room where he is by himself. And if he happens to walk into a room where you are alone, then I want you to leave.”

My mouth opened in astonishment, what in blazes was wrong with him?

“Aren’t you being a little bit paranoid here? Is it really necessary?”

“I will not have any arguments about this.”

My mouth was set in a frown and I took a deep breath to calm myself.

“Fine. I will do that,” I said. Then I grabbed a fist full of his shirt and pulled him close to me until we were eye to eye. “But you seriously need to change your attitude about females by the time I get back to my timeline or else what ever relationship we have will not work.” I let go and took a couple of steps back before turning to him.

“What were the three of you talking about?” I asked.

“She knows why we are here.”

“Not a surprise. What else? The three of you were talking for a very long time.”

“It has nothing to do with this mission.” He looked away and rubbed the back of his neck.

“Okay. Then what were the two of you talking about?”

“Cass, it was a private matter.”

From the look he gave me, I could tell that he was going to be stubborn. I let it go for now.

“Fine. Let’s change the subject. Now that we know where his room is, one of us should keep him busy while the other goes into his room to search the place.”

When he didn’t say anything, I went on. “I think you should keep him busy while I search his room.”

“No.”

“Okay, I will keep him busy while you search his room.”

“No.”

“Wolrik—”

“I want you to stay here while I look in his room.”

“Be reasonable. What happens if he comes back while you are still in the room?”

“I will be fine. I have done this before. Alone. There will be no trouble.”

“We agreed to work together. Partners, remember?”

“You agree to obey me?”

I was seeing red.

“Obey! What century do you think we are in? Wait. Never mind. If you are going to be unreasonable, then we are done.”

I walked to the door, needing some time to cool off or else I was liable to harm him. But before I

even got to the door, he grabbed my arms and shook me.

“We are not done. You are mine and you will not leave me.”

I was shocked for a moment by his outburst. He was so unlike the Wolrik that I had known so far.

“What has gotten into you? Let go of me!” I said.

He wasn’t hurting me and I wasn’t afraid of him, but I did not like the way he was handling me. Before Uncle Ned took me in, I had lived too many years with people who forced me into a corner to intimidate me, to make me feel scared and weak. I never thought for a moment though, that that was his intention. I would never be with him, to have him in my bed or feel the way that I did if I had thought he was like that. But intentional or not, he needed to know that he had to respect me enough not to manhandle me like this.

“I said, let go!”

“I will not. I will never let you go. Not when I have finally found you.”

“I’m warning you, let go!”

If I wasn’t so upset by the whole situation, I would have rolled my eyes at this tasteless antic he was on, like a bad scene in a romance novel.

“Never,” he growled before he kissed me. I resisted but he forced my mouth open and aggressively went in. When I kicked his leg, his grip on me loosened. I took that opportunity to take a slight step back and punched him in the stomach, knocking the breath out of him. He moved back, more out of surprise than hurt.

“You do not get to be a domineering, male, sexist asshole! I am not some helpless woman who will let you bully me around. You need to respect me and by respecting me, it means—when I tell you to let go of me, you let go! Do I make myself clear?”

When he nodded, I relaxed my stand and sat down on the floor. He went down next to me and lifted his hand towards me, then stopped, fist it, and placed it back to his side.

“Forgive me, Cass. I didn’t mean...I would never hurt you.”

“I know,” I said and covered his hand with mine. He opened his hand and grabbed on to mine.

“I never doubted that you would. I just did not like it. I spent most of my childhood with people who took pleasure in making me feel weak and scared. I know that wasn’t what you were doing,” I said the last part quickly when he looked offended. “But regardless, you do not have the right to handle me that way.”

“You are right. I am sorry. I was scared and angry, but that is no excuse.”

“I understand why you were angry; I was too. But why were you scared?”

“You said we were done.” He looked at me in surprise.

“Yes, we are done.”

He looked pained. He let go of my hand and got up. His back was to me and his head was down and he continued, “I understand. We need to keep up the pretense of our relationship. I will need to stay in this room with you. But, you have my promise that I will not touch you. I will sleep on the floor.”

I was confused and then I stifled a laugh. I walked over to him and wrapped my arms around his waist. He stiffened.

“When I said we are done, I meant our partnership. Not us,” I said.

He looked relieved when he turned around to face me. “Cass, I...don’t ever...” He stopped, raw with emotion that made my stomach flutter. I stood on my toes, kissed him, and led him to bed.

The moon was still high in the sky when I woke up. There was enough light for me to see the contours of his face. I lightly traced them and wondered how I got here, in this bed with this man whom I was slowly beginning to get to know and understand. He stirred, wrapped me into his arms and kissed my temple. I noticed that the scar that the Wolrik from my timeline had, was not there yet. He stirred again, grasped my hand, kissed it, and placed it over his heart. I smiled at him as he slowly woke up.

“Is everything all right?”

“Yes,” I replied.

Everything was perfect.

Fully awake now, he kissed me lightly on the lips and then nudged my mouth open with his tongue to deepen the kiss. His hands roamed my body as if wanting to touch and to know every part of me. His lovemaking was slow and gentle, as if savoring every part of our intimate joining. I lay awake afterward listening to the sound of his breathing. It seemed strange how comfortable I was with having him next to me. I giggled to myself at my thoughts of wanting to keep him, putting him in my pocket and taking him home with me. How did it work? I wondered. I was with this man in the past. How would I feel when I saw him in my timeline? Would my feelings be the same? Would I say good-bye to him here and step into the other side and our relationship would move forward as if nothing happened? It would only be a minute for me but a lifetime for him. How did it work? Would he be the same person? Would he feel the same for me as he did now? I drifted off to sleep with no answers. And again, I dreamed of the garden, the teacher, and my training.

It was late morning and we were still in bed, not at all in a rush to get out. We lay there facing each other as we talked. He would ask me questions, wanting to know everything about me. I was equally curious about him. We linked hands while he kissed me softly on the lips before he asked me the meanings of the names I had called him. When I told him he became offended. We started arguing. He was thinking that he wasn't a male chauvinistic pig or a sexist and I told him that he was. I'm not sure if we settled that argument. All I remembered was we ended up kissing and then I was back in his arms. Later, I asked him what he meant when he said, "Not after I finally found you." Had we met before? He shrugged and said nothing. When I probed a little bit more, he said he only meant he and I were finally together. He had wanted to be with me from the first moment he saw me. I asked him why he felt this way. After all, I was a stranger to him. He said he didn't know why. It just was.

We talked about other things and avoided the subject of our lack of partnership. I had decided that it wasn't worth arguing over again. I just had to sneak around him. I knew that wasn't a great idea but he was so stubborn about it and I needed to prove to him that I was helpful. Maybe if I did a good job, he would start acting like a partner rather than an overbearing Neanderthal. Uncle Ned had told me once that from his travel experience, when two people are in a disagreement, it helped to put oneself in the other person's shoes. I should think about doing that, putting myself in his shoes, but no. This was one situation where I was right and he was wrong. I had to make him understand that I was capable of helping him if he would just let me. This mission was my responsibility anyway—regardless of the fact that it was handed to me by accident. I was the one who was responsible, even if I didn't wish to be.

There was another subject that we avoided—his relationship with Pix. When I asked him about her, he would fidget, look uncomfortable, and change the subject. I assured him that if they had been in a relationship, I didn't mind as long as they weren't in one now. The only thing he would tell me was that it had always been me whom he loved, no one else. He made it sound like we had met before. When I mentioned this to him, he responded by kissing me and taking me to bed. It was frustrating that he wouldn't tell me certain things, but I let it go for now. I didn't want to ruin our moments together. It was late afternoon when we got up and dressed. We were about to leave our room when there was a loud bang followed by another. The ship rocked and then listed from one side to the other. I would have gone flying if Wolrik had not caught and steadied me. There were several shouts and more loud bangs.

"Stay here!" he shouted over his shoulder as he walked to the door.

I followed him. He was able to grab a crewmember to find out what was going on. The man told us that the ship was under attack by pirates. I was following Wolrik up the stairs when he turned and pushed me back into the room.

"I said, stay here!" he shouted over the noise.

He closed the door behind him. When I tried to open it, it was locked. I pounded on the door and shouted for someone to open the door. The knob turned several times on the other side and I called out to whomever it was.

“Cassandra, it is I, Merigold. Are you all right?”

“Yes, I’m fine. Can you open the door?”

“Yes, but I need you to stand away from the door right now.”

I moved back as the doorknob was shot out right before he kicked the door open. He stepped in and looked around before he found me.

“We must move now. The ship is being boarded,” he said as he took my arm and led me up the stairs.

The scene was chaotic. Everyone was running everywhere, screaming and shouting as several cannons were fired on us from the other ship. Bodies lay everywhere and more people were dying or injured from the blasts or from falling debris. I looked everywhere for Wolrik but I couldn’t find him. I realized Merigold was leading me to a ladder on the side of the ship. There was a small boat in the water. He was shouting over the noise for me to climb down. I wrenched my arms away and started running.

“Are you mad?” he shouted when he caught up to me and grabbed both of my shoulders. “This ship is about to be boarded! We have to leave.”

“Let go,” I shouted, “I will not leave without Wolrik.”

When he wouldn’t let go, I kicked his leg and ran. I went back downstairs to our room, but he wasn’t there. I started looking from room to room calling his name. The ship rocked and the floors trembled each time another cannon blast hit. I leaned against the wall to prevent myself from falling and continued my search. There was a sudden pain in the back of my head before everything went dark.

## Chapter 9

I tried to open my eyes and move my body but it felt like lead. I could hear muffled sounds around me but I couldn't distinguish where they were coming from or what the sounds were. I winced and then groaned when I tried to move my head. Gradually, I started to remember what had happened. Slowly, I became aware that I was on the floor of the ship and still at sea. Slowly my body began to respond. I could feel a shift in the air as if someone was leaning over me. I blinked several times to get the fog out of my eyes and to deter the bright lights above me. A shadow moved over and blocked out the light. My eyes were then able to adjust and focus on Wolrik.

"What happen?" I asked him while I tried to get up.

Before he could tell me, hands grabbed at his shoulder and mine pulling us apart. I called out his name and tried to free myself. He was doing the same even though there were five of them trying to subdue him and having very little luck. I elbowed my captor hard in the chest and he let go. I ran to Wolrik, who was also freed from his captors and was running to me when a shot was fired. I froze as I felt a sting then fire at my neck. Wolrik also stopped in his tracks. He looked stunned. He looked down at himself. I followed his gaze and saw a red dot appear on his shoulder before it started to spread. He crumbled to the ground as I screamed out his name and knelt beside him, cradling him in my arms. This was the first time I ever wished that I could use magic so I could heal him.

A shadow crossed over me. I saw a pistol held by a hand and I slowly looked up shocked to see Merigold smiling down at me with satisfaction.

"You!"

I looked around. Scruffy, unkempt, and ruthless men were gathered around us. I had seen none of them before and none were from the ship that we had sailed on.

"Pirates," I said.

"On the contrary, madam, we are privateers."

"What happened to the others that were on the ship?"

"You, love, should worry about yourself." He kicked Wolrik's leg before continuing, "and him."

I looked down at Wolrik. He did not look good. His face was pale and his breathing was shallow.

"Why did you shoot him? He has done nothing to you!"

"That, love, is not true. I did warn him that I would shoot him if he gave me any problems, and he did. Isn't that right, boys?" he said as he turned to look at his crewmembers. They jeered, laughed, and shouted in agreement.

He crouched down and assessed the damage. He then pushed down on Wolrik's wound with his finger. Wolrik shouted in pain. I quickly smacked Merigold's hand away. This had everyone laughing and upsetting him. He pulled me to my feet and pushed me backwards. Someone from behind me grabbed my arms, preventing me from moving.

"Take her to my quarters."

"No!" I yelled and struggled to free myself. "I will not go. I want to stay with him."

Merigold took a pistol from the man next to him and aimed it at me. I stopped. His lips curved into a smile, which brought out the anger in me. I pulled even harder at the arms of the person who was holding onto me. I was glaring at Merigold with hate and rage. He sighed and pointed the pistol at Wolrik. I stopped.

"He is not dead but I promise you I will kill him if you don't go willingly."

I bit my lip and forced myself to calm down and let the man lead me away. It was hours before someone came into the room. Several men carrying a tub and buckets of water followed. One of them informed me that their captain wanted me to take a bath. He said if I refused, they had orders to force me. They all looked like they were hoping I would refuse and were disappointed when I told them to

leave. Merigold came in when I had just finished putting on my dress.

He looked disapprovingly at me and I had guessed right that he thought I would wear the robe that was draped over a chair instead of my dress, which was torn, dirty, stained, and probably smelled. Food was brought in after him. I did not say a thing. I just looked at him with hate. I hated him for bombing the ship. I hated him for taking us prisoner. I hated him for shooting Wolrik and making me stand here helpless and scared. And I hated myself for not being able to do anything about it. I wished I had Keya's magic. If I had it, Wolrik and I could escape. If I had it, I wouldn't be so scared. When it was just the two of us alone in the room, he walked over to the food-filled table and sat down.

"Hungry?" he asked. "Sit," he said without waiting for my reply and gestured to the chair opposite him. He arched one eyebrow when I didn't move. "Do I have to threaten his life again?"

I slowly walked over and sat down. "So, he is not dead?"

He reached for his napkin and placed it on his lap. He started to eat as I sat there waiting for him to answer.

"He is, at the moment, alive," he finally said.

"I want to see him."

"When you are done eating, I will consider it. If you do not eat, then that will not be possible."

I stared at him, giving him my most evil, frightening stare. He ignored me and didn't even bother looking up. When I started to eat, he lifted his head and smiled. I pretended not to notice as I held the knife tightly in my hand and forced myself to not do anything rash. I needed to see Wolrik. I forced myself to eat even though I had no appetite. I was too occupied with anger and worry to be hungry. He was still eating when I was done. When he was finally finished, I asked him again to see Wolrik. He leaned back and looked at me in amusement.

"What is it about him that you find so intriguing?"

"He is not a pirate, for one thing."

That took the smile from his lips. After a while his smile came back. He pushed his chair back and walked over to the door and waited. I quickly got up and followed him. We went below deck where someone handed him a lantern at the bottom of the landing. He took my arm and led me down another set of stairs, down a hallway, to the left and then another hallway until we reached a door.

It was like walking into a war zone. Pots, pans, knives, everything was upended and strewn everywhere. The walls were covered with some dark brown substance. Half-cooked or half-prepared food was mixed in with soiled rags and dirty dishes. The air was mixed with a foul smell of decomposing meat and whatever was cooking on the stove. The place and the smell overwhelmed my senses, making my stomach turn, and I wished that I hadn't just eaten. In the midst of it all, Wolrik was lying on top of a huge dirty table.

I cautiously went over to him. He looked worse than before. The shoulder where he was hit was caked with old, dry, blood as well as fresh. The bandage they used was dirty and also soaked with blood. He was hot to the touch and lay still as a stone. I would not have believed that he was still alive if I hadn't seen a faint rise and fall of his chest. I looked to the man who did this to him and my hatred for him turned into pure rage. I never wanted to kill anyone in my life until now. He saw my face and I saw a speck of worry in his eyes before he clamped it down and gave me an emotionless stare.

"We patched him up as best as possible. It is up to him now."

I screamed as I ran to him and punched him in the face. He went down but quickly came back up. He grabbed for me but I blocked his arm and punched him hard in the stomach. He bent at the waist and tried to catch his breath. I took the opportunity to move in front of him, anchored my feet at the back of his, and pushed him. He tripped over my feet and fell to the ground. I grabbed a knife from the counter and placed it on his neck. He went still. He did not look frightened but angry. I didn't care. I was beyond caring at that moment.

"If he dies, I will kill you even if I have to crawl out of Hell to do it! He cannot stay here. He needs a room where I can attend to him."

Within seconds I was flat on my back, him on top of me and the knife skidded somewhere in the distance. I tried to get away, but it was of no use. He was bigger and stronger than me.

“Threaten me again and I will make you suffer until you beg me to kill you,” he said before he smacked me hard across the face.

A sound came from my throat as I felt the pain on my cheek. Everything looked fuzzy for a few seconds before it cleared. He lifted me up and dragged me out of the kitchen. There were a few of his men hovering by the doorway. He pushed his way through. Some of them he punched to get them out of the way. I stumbled a couple of times and would have fallen if he had not had a death grip on my arm. He opened a door and threw me hard inside the room. I fell to the ground as the door banged shut behind me. Tears were flowing down my cheeks.

The sun had set and the room was pitch black. I leaned against a wall with my eyes closed and I thought of nothing. After hours like this, the door finally opened and light filtered in. I didn't even flinch or bother to react. I just watched from where I was sitting as they carried Wolrik in and left him lying on the floor before leaving. Once again silence and darkness fell in the stifling and claustrophobic room. I sat there numb and dejected. I had nothing in me. I didn't know what to do to make everything right. I felt so scared and helpless. I didn't hear him at first. And then slowly his faint voice floated into my ears—he was calling my name. I cried with relief and crawled to him. He was shivering even though his body was hot to the touch.

“Cass.”

“I'm here,” I said as I took his hand in mine.

“Are you all right? Did he hurt you?”

“I'm fine. He didn't hurt me.”

He fell back into silence. I didn't know what to do for him. I didn't know how long he had before his wound got infected and ultimately killed him. Tears formed in my eyes and I brushed them away, angry with myself for being so weak, for not having an ounce of thought in me to think of a way out. At least to do something. Anything. Hit, scream, rage at something. Anything. Anything besides sitting here waiting helplessly as he died. I gave myself a count to ten and then twenty before I got up and opened the door. There were two men standing guard. I told one of them that I wanted to see their captain. They did not appear to be surprised. One nodded and motioned with his hand to follow.

He was sitting there behind his desk looking regal and dignified on his throne. He smiled with triumph at my dejected and resigned form. When the door closed, he came around the table, grabbed my chin, and forced me to look at him.

“There is still a trace of hostility in there,” he said as he looked into my eyes.

“It will always be there no matter what you do.”

His head tilted back as he gave out a boisterous laugh. He went back to his desk, propped up his feet, and just looked at me with amusement.

I walked over and sat down on the other side of the desk.

“What do you want?”

He placed his feet back down and leaned on the table to move closer to me. His eyes were filled with warmth and desire. “You.”

I smirked. “You lie. Tell me what you really want.”

He feigned hurt. “I never.”

I smiled then. “You always.”

“What makes you think I am lying?” he said as he leaned back in his chair.

“If you did want me, I would have been in your bed right now. Unwillingly, of course.”

“Yes well, I want a willing partner. I do not rape women. It is beneath me.”

“You mean an insult to your manhood.”

He waived his hand in a “whatever” gesture. “I want you willingly.”



“That will never happen.”

“And if I were to threaten to kill your lover?”

“Threat is the same as force which, in this case, is the same as rape.”

He chuckled and got up, went to a cabinet, poured two glasses of wine, and placed one next to me. He sat back down and looked at me with a serious expression on his face.

“Your two friends stole something from me and I want it back.”

“What did they steal?” I asked even though I had a pretty good idea of what it was. “And how come you didn’t get it back yourself? We were on a ship out at sea. Where could they possibly have gone to?”

“That I do not know and that is the annoying part. My men looked everywhere on that ship and there was no sign of them anywhere. But they did say there was a boat missing. How they slipped away from us is a mystery—one I wouldn’t mind solving. All I know is that they have something of mine and I want it back. You and your lover will help me find it.”

“Well then, you shot the wrong person. Wolrik is the only person that knows them. This was my first time meeting those two.”

“You are lying. I saw the way you looked at her. She did not look like a strangers in your eyes.”

“I know of them, but I don’t know enough to help you find whatever it is you are looking for. You still haven’t told me what this thing is they stole from you.”

He sighed and gulped down his drink.

“Please, madam, spare me. You know exactly what the object is. You and your lover were looking for it too and were going to steal from me if they had not gotten to it first.”

“Fine. The truth. All I know is that it is called the Sighya Stone.”

“You are lying.”

“No, I am not,” I said, emphasizing each word through clenched teeth, tired of this conversation already. “Look. All I know is that my husband was looking for you to get the stone. How he was going to take it from you, I do not know. You have to ask him yourself.”

He narrowed his eyes at me and I narrowed my eyes back at him. He then drummed his fingers while I waited to see if he was going to believe my lies.

“I guess we will have to wait until he is healed before we can go any further.”

“If you hadn’t shot him, you would have gotten your answers by now.”

“I warned him that I would shoot him if he did not behave. Besides, you are easier to reason with than he.”

“You shot him because it was easier to overpower me than him.”

“Do not test me, love,” he warned, “If I have to, I will find some other means to get my property back.”

More like stolen property, I thought to myself.

“The seas are harsh and so are the men who serve under me. One sign of weakness and they will not hesitate to cut my throat and take over the ship. And if that happens, the two of you will not survive a minute more after my dead body hits the floor. They will kill your lover and have their turn raping you before selling you as a slave. The two of you had put me into a very difficult situation. I had no choice and will not have a choice but to retaliate whenever either of you tries to subjugate me. You should remember that the next time your temper gets the better of you.”

“What happened to the other ship?”

“Why do you care?”

“What happened to them?” I demanded.

“Do not worry. They are fine. We took what we needed and left them where they were. They are dead in the water. But in a couple of days, someone will rescue them.”

“You bastard! You’ve killed them!”

“I said they are fine and I would watch how you speak to me, love. I do not tolerate being

insulted.”

“I don’t care what you like and don’t like. There will be a storm coming; the ship and the people on it will not be able to live through it.”

“Are you insane, woman? Look outside. It is clear as day with no clouds. I can assure you no storm will come.”

“How can you possibly know that? The weather is unpredictable. Even the fanciest and most advanced technology can’t predict the weather accurately.”

“Because, madam, I have lived at sea all of my life and I would know when a storm is coming. It will be a clear day and night throughout our journey. Now get out!”

He called out and someone opened the door.

“Take them to one of the better rooms and send the doctor in to have a look at him,” he said before going back to his desk and reading through some documents—dismissing me.

“You have killed them all,” I said to him before letting his goons take me away.

## Chapter 10

The doctor cleaned out Wolrik's wound and redressed it, all the while chatting with me. He had signed on to His Majesty's Navy as a ship doctor in order to travel around the world. Pirates attacked their ship and Merigold's ship came along to help. After two days in his company, Merigold had convinced him to stay on board. They had traveled to many places and he had learned a lot about different ways of practicing medicine. I was grateful that he knew more about what he was doing than most doctors of his time and that Wolrik would be in good hands with him.

As each day passed, Wolrik looked better and better but the doctor had warned me that he was not out of the woods yet. His fever would get worse before it got better. Even though I knew this, I prayed that he was wrong. But as the doctor predicted, several exhausting days were spent trying to cool him and calm him down from the delusions that filled his head and coaxing him into drinking his medicine or broth. Just when I thought he wasn't ever going to break free of his fever, it went as quickly as the storm. Wolrik was thrashing and raving as the ship listed and rocked from all sides by the turbulent sea. It seemed, as the weather outside got worse, so did he. Several times he tried to get out of bed and I tried hard to keep him in it. But he was determined to leave and knocked me over as he sprang up and ran out the door. He was on the deck ignoring the fierce winds, harsh rains, and rough waves that knocked, pushed, and drenched the ship and everyone on board.

He was bigger and stronger than me, but that didn't deter me from grabbing his arms and pulling, with little success, to bring him back to the room. I feared for his life and urgently called his name trying to wake him up from his nightmare. Someone pulled me aside and used the butt of his pistol to hit him over the head. Wolrik went down like a brick wall. Merigold pulled me against him and steadied me as he shouted to two of his men who were close by to take Wolrik and me back to the room. A couple of minutes later, the doctor came in to have a look at him and the bump that was forming on his head. He stayed with us for most of the night until his patient quieted down and went to sleep. At the captain's orders, Wolrik was tied down to prevent him from leaving the bed again.

The storm finally passed late the next morning. I could feel the sense of relief from everyone when I went out to see the damage. All the sails were down and everything was in disarray. The crew had already started working on repairs. I was going back in when someone grabbed me and dragged me into a room. I stumbled and turned to see Merigold at the door. He looked exhausted, haggard and tired. He eyed me as he walked over to his cabinet. I turned and followed his movement. Besides his appearance, there was something wrong with him, something different that I couldn't place. I watched, unsure of how to feel at the moment, at his peculiar mood. Did I feel fear, sympathy, or did I console? These were not words to give to a person with his persona. So I decided to feel nothing and waited. He drank one full glass of wine and then another before slamming the glass on a table. I flinched at the sound.

"How did you know?"

I looked at him in confusion, wondering what he was talking about. When I didn't answer him, he walked over to me, grabbed my arms, and gave them a firm shake. "How the hell did you know?"

"Know what? I don't know what you are talking about."

"The weather! How did you know about the storm? You who never stepped foot on a ship, how did you know about the storm?"

"I didn't," I lied. I couldn't tell him that I was from the future.

"You are lying."

"No, I am not. Let go of me; you are hurting me."

He studied me for a couple of seconds, then frowned and pushed me to the ground. "Leave!"

I sat on the floor looking at him as he went back and started to drink from the bottle. When it was

empty, he threw it at the wall.

“I said, leave!”

I quickly got up and headed for the door. He grabbed my wrist when I passed him.

“They are all dead, aren’t they?”

I stayed silent.

“The ship. They are all dead.”

“Maybe, but I believe in miracles.”

“You are lying to me again. Leave,” he said, letting me go before turning his head away.

“I am not lying. It is you who is lying,” I said before running out the room.

I paused at the closed door wondering who he was. I did not understand him. One minute he was compassionate, and the next—heartless. Which one was the real him? I shook my head, trying to shake off my curiosity at his capricious personality. Why did I care? I quickly went back to my room. Wolrik was slowly coming awake. I felt his forehead and was relieved that his fever was gone. He opened his eyes and looked at me. I smiled.

“What happened?” he asked and was surprised when he realized he was tied up.

I quickly undid the binds as I explained to him about being shot, his fever, and why he was tied up. He sat up and cringed as he cradled his head in his hand from the pain. I told him that Merigold had to hit him over the head so we could take him back inside. The door swung open. Wolrik quickly got up and pushed me behind him as we watched Merigold and three of his men walk in. I looked at him, studied him, and saw no trace in his eyes and demeanor to suggest that the scene from moments before in his cabin had ever happened. His stoic eyes stared back at me, not betraying anything. Was it all an act before? Some how I didn’t believe it but the sudden change in his expression made me doubt myself. He was the first to break free of our eye contact. He looked around the room before turning to Wolrik.

“You are better now, I see,” Merigold said as he sat in a chair.

“What do you want?” Wolrik demanded.

“To talk to you alone.”

“She stays with me.”

He took out his pistol and aimed it at him.

“I am in no mood to argue. Love,” he said to me without taking his eyes off of Wolrik, “go out and get some fresh air.”

I felt Wolrik stiffen when Merigold called me “love.” Not wanting him to get shot again, I quickly moved in front of him and looked up.

“It’s okay. He just wants to know everything about the Sighya stone.”

He looked down at me and I could tell he didn’t like the idea of having me away from his side and wanted to argue further. But I pleaded with my eyes for him not to do anything rash. He reluctantly nodded in agreement.

“Good,” Merigold said with a smile.

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They both watched her walk out the door. They were still staring when the door closed, leaving the two of them alone.

“How much do you want for her?”

Wolrik clenched his hand, forcing himself to stay calm. He wanted to kill the man with his bare hands but knew that if he did, Cass and he would not make it off of this ship alive.

“My wife,” he said, emphasizing the word wife, “is not for sale.”

“Everyone is for sale.”

“She is not.”

Merigold stood up quickly and paced around him like a predator toying with his prey before the

final attack. Wolrik stood anchored to where he was, waiting, unfazed by the intimidating tactic. They both had similar traits, but their differences were just as apparent. Both were tall, though Wolrik towered over him by a couple of inches. They both had long, lean and solid bodies, built for agility, although Merigold was slightly more muscular and wider than Wolrik. They both were seasoned warriors, veteran soldiers, who sacrificed, killed, and fought their way through life for others and for themselves. They were both jaded and knew too much of the world and its darker side. And both came out blemished with their own inner demons to fight. If they had met under different circumstances, they would have seen a little bit of themselves in each other. Their similarities would have formed a greater understanding of each other, a bond between two people of their kind, a friendship. Though at this moment, in this time, that was not the case. They saw each other as enemies.

“Your wife told me everything about the Sighyn stone,” Merigold said as he kept pacing. When Wolrik did not respond, he went on. “It is worth more than I had thought.”

“You now know its value. What do you want from us?”

“Your friends took it from me and I want it back.”

“They are not my friends.”

“Regardless, you and your wife are the only link to them. I want the stone back.”

“Why should I help you? The moment you find the stone, you will kill us.”

“True, but if you agree to help me, you will at least have time to think of a way to escape. Not that I will give you the opportunity but you may give yourself some hope. If you don’t, I will kill you now and sell her.”

Merigold smiled when he finally got a reaction and then he moved closer to him.

“She is most informative when she is aroused to the occasion.”

He jabbed his pistol to Wolrik’s ribs when Wolrik turned and was about to grab for him.

“You do not want to do anything foolish and get yourself killed. How is she to survive then?”

It took all of Wolrik’s concentration to remain still and not do what he desperately wanted to do, which was to grab the man’s throat with his bare hands and choke the life out of him.

“If you harm her in anyway, I promise you, I will kill you,” Wolrik said through clenched teeth.

“That will all depend on you. Now, are you going to help me or not?”

He gave the man a curt nod.

“Excellent.” And with that, Merigold left, leaving behind anger and hostility in his wake.

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It was several hours before Wolrik joined me outside. He took the time to wash up and put on clean clothes. I was going to ask him what they had talked about when he gave me a slight gesture of his head telling me to keep quiet. He led me into our room. When I was about to ask him again, he placed a finger to my lips before replacing it with his lips. The kiss was brief. He stepped back from me and lifted his arm up in the air. His fingertips started to glow, then a stream of light flowed out of them and up to the ceiling, spreading outward until all the walls, door, and floor were covered in the glow before it slowly faded away. My mouth opened in awe. I smiled at him and he smiled back.

“What was that for?”

“It is so no one will be able to hear anything in this room.”

I chuckled with glee as if I had just found a new toy.

“You sound proofed the room.”

He smiled at my reaction and then turned serious. “I am sorry for any pain or inconvenience I have caused you.”

“I am fine.”

“You look tired. I heard from the doctor that you stayed with me the whole time and you did not eat or sleep much.”

“I am fine. Don’t worry about me. I am stronger than I look. Besides, if you had seen the condition

of the kitchen, you would have lost your appetite, too. And I did get enough sleep. Stop worrying about me. Now tell me about what he said to you. I didn't tell him what the stone could do, just the name."

"I did not think you would. But before we discuss that, I have some thing more important to do." He kissed me and carried me to bed.

We were still in bed when he told me, for the time being, he would help Merigold find the stone to buy us some time until we hit land, then we could make our escape. I asked him if he knew where they were going. He guessed that Pix and Norus, would be heading back to Keya's castle. And it was where they were heading. No one, until now, knew the real location of her fortress. Keya always used magic to make doorways to her castle. There were also doorways in that castle that led to different locations on earth. It took him years to figure out where the location was by ship. I told him I was worried we would be too late when we arrived there. He assured me that Pix and Norus also had to travel there by ship. And since Merigold incapacitated the one we had been on, it would take them some time to commandeer another one. I was relieved to hear that we still had a chance to get the stone. Then I sat up and turned to him. Sometimes I could be so dense.

"Why didn't you use your magic to get us out of here? Maybe take over the ship or make sure we didn't get captured?"

"We are forbidden to use our magic in front of the Tyrenians."

"Tyrenians?"

"People without magic. I am sure in your timeline they have stressed the need to be discreet."

I remembered Xena had told me we couldn't let anyone know we could use magic. The only time the rule could be broken was if magical or mythical creatures were terrorizing or about to hurt someone. Then we would have no choice but to use magic to capture them. If that happened, I had to immediately let her or one of the Elvains know about it so they could do damage control. They would erase those people's memories or alter them in a way that they would think what they saw was something else entirely. For instance, if it were at night, they would find themselves in bed and thought they had a nightmare.

"Yes, but it is hard to remember these things when you are in a situation like this. You could have gotten yourself killed."

"He would not have killed me. While you were still unconscious, he mentioned that he needed something from me."

I looked at him, incredulous at his nonchalance.

"He shot you! You could have died from your wound."

"That was something unexpected, but I would not have died."

"What makes you so sure?"

"This is not the first time I have been shot. I know an excellent shooter when I see one. Merigold purposely shot me in an area where it would do less damage."

"That's not very comforting to hear," I grumbled.

"Cass, aside from preventing the Tyrenians from discovering magic, it would be difficult for me to take over the ship without help, especially a ship this size. We would need at least three people on rotation to man the helm and navigation. We would also need several crewmembers to be ready and work the cannons and the ammunitions if we are under attack. And—"

"Okay, I think I understand. You need tons of people in order to run this ship. What about escaping?"

"If we had tried to escape, there would be no-where for us to go. The ocean is vast with no land in sight and I can only lead us within a five-mile radius from where we are. I would have taken us into the middle of the ocean. Our best option is to wait until we hit land."

After a while, without a word from me, he asked, "Are you angry with me?"

"I'm not angry," I grumbled again and turned away from him.

How could I be mad when his explanation made sense? But I didn't have to like the fact that he

almost got killed. I didn't believe that the shot would not have killed him. He was lucky. I decided to drop the conversation knowing that it would agitate me more if we kept talking about it. He was alive and that was what mattered.

He pulled me into his arms and whispered into my ear, "I love you, Cass."

I turned around to face him and he held my stare.

"My feelings will never change," he said.

I looked away, unable to say it back to him. I did have feelings for him. I would not have gone to bed with him if I hadn't. His declaration of love scared me and I felt the urge, as I did before, to pull back. "How can you possibly be in love with me or the fact that you believe it will not change? After this is over, after I leave, it will be several centuries before you will see me again."

"I will wait for you. You have my promise."

I looked away again. I knew he wanted me to say the same words to him, but I couldn't. I don't know why, I just couldn't. Maybe it was because of what happened to Von, the pain I felt after his death. I wished Wolrik hadn't said those words. I didn't want to talk about it anymore, so I change the subject and I was relieved when he also let the subject go. We spent most of that day in bed. Though he was still weak and needed rest, he would arouse me in bed, assuring me that it would not hinder his recovery. I was worried at first, but then, when he kissed me and his hands were on me, I thought of nothing but pleasure. He seemed to have an unlimited appetite, as if trying to make up for our lost days when he had been wounded.

There was a question at the back of my mind and I wasn't sure if I should ask him, but I had to know. The question arose during his feverish state, during the storm, when he had called out a name. He cried out her name in anguish as he pleaded for forgiveness. When he ran up to the top of the ship, I had feared he was going to jump over if Merigold had not hit him over the head. As I looked at him now, he seemed fine. He did not look like a man in turmoil.

"Who is Siera?"

He stiffened at my mention of her name.

"You called her name during your fever. Who is she?"

He was so silent and still that I almost believed he was frozen in time. I put my arms around him, hugging him close, trying to give him as much comfort as possible. "It's all right. Whenever you are ready to talk about it."

I got up to give him some space. He held on to my hand and I waited.

"She was an innocent that I murdered."

I sat back down, unable to believe what he had just said. "What happened?"

He took a deep breath before speaking.

"During my time working for Keya, she had a mission for me. Something went wrong. I had no memories during that time. All I remembered was going into Nienger, the forbidden zone, looking for something, and the next thing I knew, I was lying in the forest, in the middle of nowhere bleeding to death. Siera found me and took care of me. She kept me alive. It was not long until Keya's men found me and dragged us back to the castle. Keya accused me of being a traitor. She said I was trying to get information from her in order to destroy her.

What she said was true, but my mission was far from over. I had a long way to go before I could reveal myself. There was too much at stake and the fate of everyone was in my hands. And the only way to prove my loyalty was to kill Siera, the person who saved my life—to have innocent blood on my hands. I think I was still weak from my wounds or I just did not want to remember. All I could see clearly was the knife in my hand, blood everywhere, and Siera lying dead in front of me. I killed her, Cass. I have done many things in my life that I am not proud of. I have killed in battle for, and as a protector to, my lord. But I have never killed a person who did not deserve to die. A person who died because of me."

"Wolrik."

“I am a coward and a monster.”

“Don’t say that.”

“Now you know. How can you ever look at me again?”

I placed my hands on his cheeks and turned him until he faced me. How could I help him? What could I say to mend his wound? I, too, had my own sins to account for. I had lost a lot of people who I loved. Though it was in the past, a past that I did not want to relive, my guilt was still there. How was I to relieve him of his? Did I even have that right? But I had to. He was worth saving.

“I believe in you. I know you are not that person anymore. What you did was horrendous. Something you can never take back—a stigma that will stay with you forever. You are not a monster or a coward. They are the ones who cannot feel the pain of others. They are the ones who do not grieve for the innocents. Forgive yourself. It is the only way you will be able to heal and start making amends.”

“Cass...”

I gathered him in my arms and ran kisses down his face until our lips met. He held me tighter and kissed me hard on the mouth. He was hungry and filled with the need for acceptance and release. I needed him with equal intensity. He leaned forward, gently pushing me down until my back softly landed on the bed and he on top of me. We both felt the urgent need to be connected, to be jointed. Then slowly we moved in union, drowning ourselves in pleasure. He gave as much as he took until we were spent and drained.

“Thank you, Cass,” he later whispered in my ear as we drifted off to sleep.



## Chapter 11

I stayed outside on the deck for most of our trip. I was restless and bored. All I could see was a vast emptiness filled with the sea and clear skies that went on for miles. I missed land and its ever changing landscapes and colors. I don't know how anyone could or would want to endure most of their life on the sea. I guess it helped if most of their days were filled with work. There seemed to be a lot of maintenance to keep a ship in working order. Once I tried to help the crewmembers. A woman doing men's jobs was not so foreign in my timeline. But in this one, it was. They all looked appalled at first. Then some became upset and hostile while others were amused and teased me. So I stopped and relented on staying at my station, looking out over the still scenery. Wolrik had a better time than I did and I had never been so jealous of the opposite sex as I was now. The crew was friendly to him, relaxed and easy going. Several times I heard bouts of laughter. He was accepted because he was one of them—a male.

After that night when he told me about Siera, I saw a change in him. He seemed to walk a little lighter, his body not as stiff. His eyes were not as hard and his mouth was not as grim. It seemed a heavy load had lifted from him. Regardless of this change, I noticed that when I met him in Edeon, in this timeline, he was like a warrior. No, more like a warrior/bodyguard. On this ship, with the crewmembers, he was relaxed and part of the motley crew, easy to get along with, and conformed to their disposition. In our cabin, alone with him, his whole demeanor changed once again. He was like one of those Greek gods; commanding, seductive and playful. There were so many sides to him, as if he were an actor playing several parts. Even the Wolrik in my timeline was different from what I saw here. He was mysterious, sweeping in to save me and then gone when the job was done; a rescuer, like a superhero without the disguise. I was baffled as to who the real Wolrik was. Throughout these revelations, there was one thing steady and true regarding him. I believed in him. For some unfathomed reason, I knew he was a person I could rely on. In the end, he would always be on my side, no matter what. How could a person feel so sure about another? It was a question that had no answer, but it was an unexplainable truth.

When I was not outside, I would be in our room practicing throwing my knife. It was odd that Merigold had returned it to me. I had mentioned to him once, about him trusting me not to stab him in the back with it. He just smiled at me and walked away. I had seen very little of him. He was either in his cabin or up on the deck, steering the ship, looking through the spyglass or, with Wolrik, looking at maps. Once in a while, I had this feeling his eyes were boring down on me. When I turned, he would be busy talking to one of his men or walking with his back to me. I had a feeling that he could see and sense what others couldn't, not by magic or from supernatural gifts, but by his keen observation. And I often wondered if he knew my secret. As impossible as it was, I had a feeling that he knew I was not from this place and that I was different from the others.

Since I had been here, in this timeline, I was haunted in my dreams by Master Xin, in the garden with the sounds of waterfall in the background. Again he was teaching me a form of martial arts. And again I did not know why. This place felt so real, but it was a dream. Though how was it possible to dream of the same place every night? Most importantly, if this wasn't a dream, what was it?

As we got nearer to our destination, Wolrik spent more time with me. We did not speak of it, but he knew, just as I did, that once our journey, our mission, was over, it would be centuries before he would see me again. And he wanted to treasure as many moments together as possible. I too felt the same. Again I thought of what would happen when I went back to my timeline. Would events in the future change because of my time in the past? Would our first kiss in the forest still happen? Would his feelings for me still be the same? Would he still be the same person that I had come to know? Or, because of my involvement here in the past, had it altered everything? Or would he become a stranger

to me and would we lose what we had here, in this timeline?

It was daylight. I was still half asleep when he whispered in my ear. "Where do you live in your timeline?"

"Hmm?" I said drowsily as I snuggled closer to him.

"When this is over, I want to find you."

My answer was at the tip of my tongue but I bit my lip before I could say anything. I was going to let him stew a little, to get back at him for not answering my question about Pix. Suddenly, there was a loud banging on the door before it burst open. Wolrik was already up and out of bed and stood protectively in front of me when several men came through before Merigold strolled in. Wolrik's hands fisted and his body was tense, ready for anything, as he watched them walk in. One of them handed their captain a chair and he sat down looking at us with displeasure. He gave a short nod and all of his men pointed their pistols at us.

"What is this about, Merigold?"

"We will be arriving tomorrow and I do not want any trouble from the two of you."

"We have not given any cause for you to believe so."

"That is true. And I am making sure that there won't be any at all. Take her away."

One of them grabbed me and hauled me out of bed. I struggled to keep the blanket over me while fending them off. Wolrik moved to stop them.

"Don't you dare move or else this time I will kill you," Merigold warned.

Wolrik did not listen. I stopped struggling and held out my hand to stop him from coming to my rescue.

"It will be all right, Wolrik. Please don't do anything."

He did not look happy, but I was glad he listened to me.

"Smart woman," Merigold said before getting up and walking out the door, followed by the rest of us.

I was shoved into an empty dark room. I sat with the blanket around me and waited for what felt like a lifetime before the door opened. I shielded my eyes from the light and as my eyes adjusted to the sudden brightness, Merigold's form began to take shape. He placed the lantern on a hook next to the door. I got up as he walked over. He came so close that, if I listened carefully, I could hear the sound of his heart beating. His eyes bore into mine so intensely that I was sure he was trying to read my thoughts. I took an intake of breath when he ripped the blanket away from me, leaving me naked. He moved in closer until our bodies touched.

"You are not a rapist."

He gave me a wicked smile, grabbed a fistful of my hair and kissed me hard. I struggled to get free but he was too strong for me. He forced my mouth open by pulling hard on my hair as he used his other hand to grab my leg, lifting it up and stepping even closer to me. I could hear the door opening and several of his men snickering. Once the door closed, he quickly let go and took two steps back from me. Humiliated and in rage, I followed and slapped him. My whole demeanor changed when I saw the relief on his face before he turned around and left. What an odd man he was. I did not understand him. He could have done more. He could have continued and finished what he had started, but he stopped. It was as if all of this was just a show for his men. He never really intended or wanted to harm me. He had left the lantern and I was able to see a pile of clothes on the floor. I walked over to see that he had given me men's clothing to wear, and thankfully, they were clean. I grabbed the shirt when I heard the soft clank of something dropping to the ground. I looked down to see it was my knife.

I quickly dressed, placed the knife inside my right boot and waited. Then waited some more. I didn't know how long I was in the room or when I fell asleep. I was awakened by someone pulling me to my feet and then pushing me forward. Half asleep, I stumbled and fell. Hands lifted me up, dragged me up the stairs and then onto the deck where everyone else stood waiting. I spotted Wolrik and took a step towards him when someone else grabbed my arm and pulled me to him. He immediately aimed his

pistol at Wolrik before I could even struggle to get free.

“Either stay by my side or I shoot your lover in the leg, your choice,” Merigold shouted for the both of us to hear.

“I’ll stay,” I said quickly and looked at Wolrik to make sure he stood where he was.

“These are the rules,” he said as he pointed the pistol at my head. “She will stay by my side at all times and you,” he gestured to Wolrik, “will stay ten steps away from us. At any time I feel you are itching to escape, I will shoot you. Do I make myself clear?”

When Wolrik nodded, Merigold motioned for us to move. We took the boat and rowed the rest of the way to the island. Everyone was on high alert. Tension and fear increased as the day darkened and a slow fog crept up on us as we got closer to the shore. Several times something other than the water moved and bumped into us. The fog became so thick that it was hard to see the person next to us. At one time there was a bloodcurdling scream before someone shouted a name. Merigold told all of us to stay quiet and keep our hands away from the water.

Throughout the whole ride, I felt as if someone was watching us. The hairs at the back of my neck stood up. I sat still as a stone like the rest of them, waiting until the ride was done. Merigold, sensing my fear, held my hand. I was annoyed that it relieved my fear. When we finally landed, we quickly left the boat for safety. Some sank down to the ground and kissed the sand. Others made the sign of the cross. There were four boats that left the ship, each holding eight people. When we made it to shore, there were only twenty-four of us left. The fourth boat glided empty to the shore.

Merigold pulled me closer and motioned Wolrik to take the lead. As we walked further inland, our thoughts of safety diminished. Though the sun was high when we left the ship and it took us only ten minutes to row to shore, the island was dark as night and the moon was the only light source. The fog surrounded us and shadows lurked everywhere. The land was barren and deserted. It was eerily quiet and still. As we turned the corner, everyone suddenly stopped. In the distance was a castle as dark and sinister as the rest of the island. A scream sounded then several more followed.

Everywhere I turned, people were being snatched up and consumed in the fog. The earth beneath us swallowed a few of us into the ground. I screamed as something grabbed my ankle and pulled me downward. I heard Wolrik shouting my name. I looked to see a body rising, half skeletal with decayed flesh, dragging me down. Merigold, Wolrik, and several others around me grabbed on to me while the others pulled at the creature that was taking me under. A few fell to the ground clutching a fistful of dead skin and bone. Merigold took out his pistol and shot the creature in the head. It finally released me and I scrambled to my feet. I clung to Wolrik as I watched the thing slowly sink back into the ground.

“What was that?” I asked Wolrik.

“Dargit. It is one of Kaya’s creation. Their purpose is to protect the perimeter of this island,” he replied.

The ground began to shake and move. Everywhere we looked patches of the ground burst open and then hands and limbs shot out. Hundreds of Dargits started crawling out of the ground.

“Head to the castle—now!” Merigold shouted as he grabbed my hand and started running.

We ran as fast as we could trying to ignore the screams around us. We were plucked one by one from the fog or sucked into the earth. By the time we cleared the fog, there were only ten of us left. We weren’t given a chance to rest before the ground beneath us shook again and Dargits came crawling out from the ground. Merigold pulled me away as a hand burst up from beneath us. One was free from the ground and attacking us. Merigold shot it with his pistol before handing the pistol to me.

“Reload it!”

“I don’t know how!” I shouted back.

He shoved me aside, unsheathed his sword that was tied around his waist, and stabbed the next Dargit that lunged at us. I watched him did the same to the one that took its place. Everywhere I looked they were attacking us and for each one we killed, another one replaced it. There was an endless stream of those hideous things. I searched for Wolrik but couldn’t find him. Then I was pulled and pushed

back. A pistol fired. Merigold came into my line of vision.

“Get a hold of yourself, love!” he shouted and shook me at the same time. “You’ll get all of us killed!”

He then turned to strike another one of Dargits before it could attack. He kept me close to him as we slowly moved forward. I was in a daze, unable to move without his help. I looked everywhere trying to find Wolrik, praying that he wasn’t dead, when I stumbled and fell. Beneath our feet was a body. I stared into the lifeless eyes of a man that I knew from the ship, one of Merigold’s men. His features were contorted with fear and pain. I could hear someone shouting at me to get up but all I could do was lie there staring at the contorted features of a dead man frozen in horror. Everywhere around me I could here shouts and screams. I could smell the carnage and decay unleashed by these things that were attacking us. It was a nightmare and I just wanted to close my eyes and tune my thoughts away from it all. Someone turned me over onto my back. I blinked and focused on Wolrik.

“Are you all right, Cass?” he said.

At first I couldn’t hear him over the ringing in my ears. He lifted me to my feet and hugged me tightly to him.

“Please tell me you are all right.”

I was still a little bit shell-shocked but sane enough to nod my head. He smiled at me with relief and wiped the tears away that were streaming down my face.

“I thought you were dead. I couldn’t find you,” I said.

“I am alive. Everything will be fine, I promise you,” he said and then he kissed me.

“Would you two snap out of it!” Merigold shouted at us. “We need some help here. You too, love. We can’t afford for you to go hysterical on us.”

He was right I needed to get my act together. They needed me to fight if we were going to survive. I took a sword from the ground and tried my best to fend off those creatures that were trying to capture us. I tried not to think or to feel but to charge ahead, to move forward. They were already dead and we were just making sure they stayed that way. But it was a losing battle. There were too many of them and only a few of us. We were down to six and they were closing in, pushing us until our backs were against each other.

Merigold pushed me behind him. His men and Wolrik surrounded me on all sides. One by one we were grabbed by dozens of hands and pulled down into the ground. I held on to Wolrik’s hand as long as I could. I called out to him and I struggled to get free as I watched him moving farther away from me.

“No!” I shouted.

This was not how it was supposed to end. I could not die now. I needed to complete my mission. Everyone was counting on me and I could not lose.

“No!” I screamed.

All of a sudden the Dargits cried out in agony. They let us go as their bodies contorted and cringed in agony. Red flames spread out from the centers of their bodies before spreading and consuming them. We all moved away in horror and shock as we watched them burst into flames. Then the flames contracted until they flickered out of existence. The six of us stood, stunned at the emptiness around us. A minute earlier, there were dozens of those Dargits, now the place was deserted. I rushed over to Wolrik and we held on to each other. In his arms, I watched Merigold staring at me. He had an expression on his face that I couldn’t decipher. He then turned and walked over to his men.

“Are you all right?” Wolrik asked me.

“Yes, thanks to you.”

“I didn’t do this. My magic was gone once we reached this place.”

“What do you mean?” I frowned.

“It is one of Keya’s defenses. Anyone with magic who came close to her fortress, their magic would be null.”

“How is that possible?”

“We do not know how she does it. She is the only one who could use magic here.”

“Then does that mean she is here now and if so, why would she help us?”

“I don’t think it was her, Cass. I—”

“Enough, the both of you. We need to go before more of those things come,” Merigold said.

He was holding a pistol in his hand and there were two at his waistband, along with his sword.

Each of his men carried as much ammo as their captain. He motioned Wolrik to move ahead of us and grabbed hold of me, keeping me close to him. For the rest of the way, we did not encounter any more of those Dargits or anything else until we got into an area filled with greenery. It was thick with foliage and it reminded me of a swamp with hanging vines everywhere. I was sure that an alligator was going to jump out and attack us. It was eerily quiet. No sounds of insects or wildlife as one would expect in a swamp or forest. All of us were on our guard.

“What is it?” Merigold asked me when I suddenly stopped.

“I thought I saw movement behind that tree over there.” I pointed to the area.

He motioned one of his men to take a look. The man wasn’t too happy and glared at me as he passed by. Cautiously he crept up to the area that I indicated and found nothing. I was relieved to know it was just my imagination. We were moving on when we heard a scream. All of us turned to see the last man of our group being hoisted up by one arm into the air by a vine. Then another one twisted around his other arm and pulled him. We all ran to help when another man screamed as he was lifted up into the air. I screamed when one of the vines slithered around me. Wolrik grabbed me while Merigold cut me loose. Then another vine came and snatched Wolrik away.

“Take this,” Merigold said and handed me his sword. He took out his knife but it fell to the ground when a vine wrapped itself around his arm and lifted him up into the air.

He grabbed his pistol and took aim. He missed fired when another one wrapped around his ankle and lifted him further up. While he was trying to free himself, I used the sword that he gave me to slash at the vines but there were too many of them. I couldn’t fend them off fast enough. One got hold of my right wrist and lifted me into the air. I used my free hand and took the sword that was still in my right hand to cut myself free. I fell hard to the ground and rolled away just before another vine could snatch me away. I scrambled to my feet, then dove to the ground and rolled again. I was just about to get up when another vine wrapped around my ankle, dropping me flat on my stomach. I twisted onto my back, leaned forward and grabbed my knife that I had placed in my boot and cut myself free. I scrambled to my feet only to roll away again before another vine could attack me. Wolrik was shouting at me to get out of there as he struggled to get free. Like the rest of them, he was constraint and hanging up in the air; there was no way I was going to leave him behind.

## Chapter 12

I dodged another vine before throwing the knife in the vicinity of his shoulder. My Uncle Ned had taught me how to throw a knife during our monthly camping trips and I have been practicing ever since. I was getting better at it, but I never threw it at a person's shoulder or any part of their body while running with no time to take aim. If I missed, then I'd have to find another way of setting him free. If I got lucky and he was able to catch it, he could set himself free. If it hit him, I figured the shoulder area would do less damage to him than anywhere else on his body. And as morbid as it sounded, he could pull the knife out and use it to set himself free.

I didn't wait to see if the knife hit him or not. I needed to keep moving, avoiding the vines. My luck ran out as several shot out in front of me, forcing me to stop. I was turning when one twisted around my legs. I fell to the ground and was being dragged when someone jumped over me and cut me free. I turned to see Wolrik, fighting off several others. I scrambled to grab a pistol nearby and was about to shoot when I saw that he had already taken care of them. I tucked the pistol in the back of my pants instead. Wolrik grabbed my hand and we ran.

"Sorry I had to stab you with the knife," I said to him when we came out of the swamp and stopped to catch our breath.

"You didn't. I was able to catch it before it hit me."

"Really?" I was surprised and looked him over. There was no blood or stab marks anywhere.

He smiled and hugged me close. "You should have left."

"There was no way I was going to leave without you."

"Thank you for saving me, but you should have listened to me and left."

I was not going to have an argument about my safety again, so I changed the subject. "What about the others? Should we go back and rescue them?"

"They will be fine. Merigold is resourceful and I threw him the knife that you gave me."

"How can you say that? We have to help them. What if the vines kill them?"

He stopped me when I was heading back.

"Trust me, they will be fine."

"How do you know?"

"Those creatures we encountered in the water, on land and the vines all are meant to capture, not kill. All of Merigold's men are in a holding cell in the castle. Keya likes to collect prisoners and deal with them later on in her own time."

I turned back to the swamp. I still felt guilty for leaving them. But I agreed with Wolrik, Merigold was resourceful. He would get out of the trap sooner or later. Plus, we needed to get the stone without Merigold and his men's interference. I was glad there was no other difficulties when we finally made it to the castle. Unfortunately our luck did not last. The place was surrounding by a moat and the only entrance was lowering the drawbridge.

"We are not swimming in that muck, are we?" I asked.

"I would not suggest it. There are things swimming in there that will eat you alive."

"Then how are we going to get in?"

Wolrik did not respond. He walked over to the two columns instead. The columns were about my height with a statue of a head of some creature I couldn't recognize. They stood five feet apart from one another and were stationed close to the edge of the moat. Wolrik went and stood next to one of them. The statue's jaw opened. I grabbed Wolrik's hand when he was about to place it into its mouth.

"I don't think that is a good idea."

"It is not. Unfortunately, this is the only way to open the drawbridge from the outside."

"What happens if it bites your hand off?"

“I do not see any other way.”

I grabbed his hand again when he moved to reach in. “Wait. Let’s think about this for a second. Is there a lever of some kind you have to pull?”

“There is a round stone you have to push in.”

I looked around and found a thin branch.

“That will not do. As soon as you place the branch in, it will snap shut.”

I looked around again and found a rock. “You push with this,” I said as I handed him the branch, “and I will shove the stone between the mouth to prevent it from closing.”

We got into position and on the count of three, I put the rock between the mouth and he quickly pushed the knob with the branch before both the shone and the branch broke into two.

He smiled at me and I laughed. I took his hand as we waited for the drawbridge to lower. The entrance was deserted. The main hall, where we stood, was huge and bare of furniture or decorations. There was a large fireplace built into the wall facing us and two stairways at each end of the fireplace. The ceiling was high and I could see there were five levels by the open balcony that surrounded the main hall.

“Do you think Pix and Norus are here?”

“Someone was here. I just do not know if it was them.”

“How do you know that?”

He pointed down to the bottom of one of the stairs. “Foot prints. One person has been walking around outside and tracked mud here. If it was Pixiena or Norus, they would be heading for Keya’s chambers.”

“Why? What is in that room?”

“A book of blood magic.”

“What does that have to do with the stone?”

“They need a spell from the book in order to use the stone.”

We climbed two flights of stairs and walked through a long hallway. He looked worried and uncertain.

“What’s wrong?”

“The place is deserted.”

“And that is a bad thing?”

“We barely survived trying to head for the castle. There should be guards.”

“Do you think this is a trap?”

“I believe that is a great possibility.”

He slowly opened the door and we walked into a larger room that looked like an old laboratory. Books lined one wall and jars of unknown substances lined on the other. There was a wooden, spiral staircase that went up to an open second floor. Up there were several tables against the wall with cages of different sizes and shapes filled with small animals and insects. I walked to a corner and opened a door I thought was a closet but it turned out to be some kind of conservatory. Unfamiliar plants of different species were clustered everywhere: on the floor, the table and hanging on hooks from the ceiling. Something brushed my hair and I turned to see a plant with long leaves moving on its own, as if feeling the area for something. I quickly walked back to the door and stopped when I saw Pix and Norus, with their backs to me in the room with Wolrik. Norus had a pistol pointed at him.

“Where is the girl?” Pix demanded.

“Dead. Killed while coming here,” Wolrik replied.

“I don’t believe you.” She took the pistol from Norus and said to him, “Search this room. She might be hiding somewhere.”

I quickly moved away from the door. It didn’t take long before the door opened and Norus stepped through. He whimpered when I pointed the pistol at his head. I turned him around and lightly pushed him back to where the others were.

“I will kill him if you don’t let Wolrik go,” I threatened.

“Go ahead. He is of no importance to me.”

“No!” Norus said in a near panic. “How can you do this? I have been a loyal subject. You must save me!”

“I do not need to do anything. You are expendable.” She then turned to me. “Go ahead kill him.”

“Please. I beg of you.” He was on his knee pleading to me. “Don’t kill me. I...I...will help you,” he stammered.

“Help me?”

“Yes! I have the stone—I can share it with you. You can bring him back.”

“Bring who back?”

“Your love. Please, please. I can help bring your love back. I will do it if you let me go. Don’t kill me, I beg of you. I will bring Von back.”

“Von? What are you talking about?”

I was interrupted by Pix’s laughter.

“You naive fool! Did they not tell you? You are not even smart enough to ask what the stone does?” she said to me.

“It keeps someone immortal.”

She laughed again.

“Is that what they told you? Well,” she looked at Wolrik, “it seems they lied to you. None of them trusted you with the truth.”

I looked to Wolrik. His face was expressionless as he stared back at me.

“What is she talking about?”

“The stone brings the dead back to life,” Pix replied.

“Is that true?” I demanded of Wolrik. After all that we had been through, I had to know from him.

“Yes,” Wolrik said quietly.

“You see. I was not lying,” Norus said. “I can help. I will help you to bring Von back. The two of you will be together again, just do not kill me” Norus begged me at my feet.

“Cass—”

“Did he tell you about us? Did he tell you that we are married and the reason behind it?” Pix interrupted Wolrik.

“Cass, listen to me.” Wolrik tried to explain but was cut off again by Pix.

“He said he loved me. He made me fall in love with him. Made me believe in him and to trust him. I took him to my bed.” She looked at me with so much sadness, then hatred, in her eyes. “He used me to get close to Keya. He even married me to make sure that he would be in her favor. He will do anything to get what he needs to complete his mission. When he got everything he wanted from Keya, he left me and never looked back.”

I looked to him, wanting to know if it was true. The guilt in those eyes said it all. I stumbled back, shocked and betrayed. How could he do this? How could he be so cruel? Just like what he did with Pix—he used me. He lied to me and made me trust him. All those times we had been together were lies.

“Everything was a lie?”

“No!” Wolrik said adamantly. “I love you, Cass. It is the truth.”

While I was distracted, Norus grabbed the pistol from my hand and pointed it at Pix. She was faster and fired at him. He went down screaming in pain while holding his arm. The pistol fell to the ground. Wolrik took that opportunity to get hold of Pix before she could do anything else.

“Cass, the pistol!” he shouted.

I grabbed it before Norus could and pointed it at him.

“You are still going to trust him after he lied to you?” Norus shouted at me.

“Join me Cass,” Pix pleaded. “Join me and I will help you get your one true love back. I will bring Von back to you.”



“Stay focused on the mission, Cass.” Wolrik warned.

“You are part of the mission.”

“Do not listen to them. They betrayed both of us.”

“Do you not see he is only using you?”

“Trust me; I am the only one you can trust.”

“Cass—”

“Stop! Everyone just stop!” I shouted. They were all talking to me at once, trying to convince me to side with them. I couldn’t listen anymore.

“As far as I know you are all lying to me.”

“Cass—”

“No! You listen. All of you. I don’t trust any of you.” I moved away from them. “But I’m willing to give you the benefit of the doubt,” I said to Norus. “If you let me hold on to the stone.”

He hesitated.

“Look, I have been lied to and betrayed and the only way I will trust you is if you let me hold on to the stone.”

“If I give it to you, you will not kill me?”

“That’s right. Give me your trust and I’ll give you mine.”

He nodded and walked over to me.

“You fool!” Pix shouted at him and struggled to get free of Wolrik’s grasp. “She is lying to you.”

“That’s close enough,” I said when he was half way to me. “Place the stone on the ground and move back to where you were standing.”

I kept the pistol trained on him as I picked up the stone. This was my first time seeing the Sighyn stone and I was surprised it looked more like a pearl than an actual stone. It was round, slightly ruff to the touch and had a dark grayish color. It was big, a sized of a golf ball. All this trouble for this.

“We better go,” Norus said to me. “Let’s kill them both and leave.”

“I don’t think so.”

His jaw dropped in surprise as he watched me quickly move until I was beside Wolrik.

“I don’t understand.”

“Do you really think I would side with you?” I said.

“B...but...but he lied to you and betrayed you!”

“Even so, I trust him more than I trust you.”

I suddenly felt faint and slumped down to the ground. I took several deep breaths and said a little prayer of thanks for keeping my hands steady thus far. I had never pointed a pistol or a gun at anyone. I had to pretend to side with him in order to get the stone. Luckily, he had it with him. I didn’t know how I was going to manage if he had hidden it somewhere.

“Cass,” Wolrik said with concern.

“I’m okay. Don’t worry about me. I just need a moment,” I assured him.

“You lied to me!” Norus screamed.

“Well, join the club!” I yelled back. “You know, I’m kind of surprised that you are surprised. What is that old saying? Something about the pot calling the kettle black?”

“You have ruined everything!”

I sighed.

“Yes, yes I’ve ruined everything and you are going to kill me. I’ve heard this before.” It was what Nara, Keya’s sister, said to me a year ago when I ruined her plans to take Keya’s magic from me.

I saw Wolrik slightly turn to me in question.

“Long story, tell you lat—”

I screamed and doubled over clutching my chest. Waves of pain kept coming as if some invisible force was stabbing me. It was followed by an intense heat that burned through me and I screamed even more. Then I started gasping for air as my lungs constricted. I felt nauseous, dizzy, and in excruciating

pain. My fear grew when an intense bright light burst from my chest then disappeared as quickly as it came. And in that instant, the pain and the constriction in my chest disappeared.

“Are you all right?” Wolrik asked me when it was all over.

I could hear the fear in his voice. I looked up at him and nodded as he gently moved my hair away from my face. He looked relieved. He had been beside me and holding me when the pain started. He was helping me up when something struck him in the head and he went down to the ground. I looked up to see Pix pointing the pistol at me.

“Give me the stone,” she demanded.

Suddenly, the room started to shake. The wooden beams on the ceiling came crashing down. Bits of rocks and stone crumbled around us. I covered Wolrik with my body as everything around us started breaking apart. Pix screamed and I turned to see her dodge a rock that fell right where she had been standing. Wolrik slowly came to and I helped him up.

“We need to leave. The whole place is coming down,” I shouted to him over the noise of falling debris.

Wolrik pulled me closer to him, away from a stone that would have crushed me. He grabbed a hold of my hand and we ran, dodging more stones and wooden beams to get to the exit. I tripped and fell and then a beam fell on my legs. I was trapped. Wolrik was trying to lift the wood off of me when I saw a stone falling right on top of him. I screamed his name and shot out my hand—as if that would help—but to my surprise, it flew to the other side of the wall before it hit him. I was stunned.

“I think I got my magic back!” I shouted with excitement and relief. Since the moment I found out about this magic, I had never felt so glad to have it until now. He had ducked when I shouted my warning and was now back at my side. I shoved the Sighyn stone to him.

“Hold this!” I shouted to him over the sounds of crumbling walls and the ceiling.

He took it and before he could do anything else, I used my magic and thought of the image of the clearing just outside the swamp, made an opening and pushed him through. Then I quickly held up my hands in front of me and created a shield just before a mountain of debris made up of fallen rocks, stones, and wooden beams came crashing down on me. I turned my head away and tightly shut my eyes as I heard the muffled sounds of objects crashing and tumbling down. I lay there immobilized and helpless for what seemed like hours before it finally quieted. It was black as night when I opened my eyes. With one hand, I formed a fist and then slowly opened it to reveal a glowing orb. I lightly tapped it with the palm of my hand and it slowly floated up, hovering in mid-air. As I moved my hand, the orb followed suit. I was entombed. The light revealed piles upon piles of rocks, stones, and wooden beams on top of my shield. Great, I thought. How was I supposed to get out of this? Then I wondered if I was claustrophobic. I shook my head to sweep the thought away. It was best not to think about it and add more worries to my troubles.

“Okay, first thing first,” I said out loud to myself. “I need to get my legs free.”

I moved the orb closer to my legs to inspect the conditions. I didn’t know if they were broken but since I was able to wiggle my toes, I figured it wasn’t too bad. What I needed to do, and hoped would work, was to concentrate on keeping the shield up and the light on while lifting the rubble off my legs. Doing three things at once was not an easy task. It was like jumping up and down on one leg while balancing a plate on one finger and bouncing a ball in the other hand. Not impossible, but it would take years of practice to learn the trick and I didn’t have the luxury of time. I also had to avoid causing an avalanche that would bring the whole place down and bury me even deeper. I was still new at using magic and I didn’t know how long I could keep the shield up. I also did not know how much weight could be placed on the shield. If there were too many things on top of it, it might break under the pressure. My heart started beating faster and my hands went damp with sweat. I forced myself to calm down and not freak out about being buried alive or crushed to death if the shield failed.

Taking several deep breaths, I concentrated. And after a few seconds of silence, I heard something move. Then I felt the pressure on my legs lighten. A loud rumbling sound came from above me and I

looked up to see my shield fading. I quickly used all of my concentration to put the shield back up. The light disappeared and everything came crashing down on my legs. I screamed in pain. If my leg hadn't broken the first time, then it definitely did this time. I waited in the dark, tense with fear and sweat dripping down my face as I listened to the rumbling of shifting debris everywhere around me. It seemed like forever before the silence settled in. I once again created an orb of light and shined it above me, inspecting the damage. The shield was lower. The rubble was closer than before. This time, I would have to do this in the dark. I looked around some more to see if there were any problems that might arise if I lifted the debris off of my legs again. Unfortunately, I couldn't tell. I could only hope that everything was stable. I diminished the light and in complete darkness I focused on the shield and on the lifting. When I felt the pressure on my legs lighten again. I lifted higher and a shot of pain went through my body when I moved my legs.

I clenched my teeth and took a couple of deep breaths before moving my legs again. Another shot of pain went through me. Something was definitely broken. Ignoring the pain as best I could I wiggled out in the dark. When I heard movements above me again, I stopped. When they subsided, I continued to free myself until the sounds started again. I held still waiting once more in the darkness. My whole body was drenched with sweat and I was shaking with fear and exhaustion. I knew I couldn't keep doing this. I was getting tired from concentrating on keeping the shield up and keeping the debris from crushing my legs. I had to do this fast. I had to move my legs in one swift motion. I took several deep breaths and counted to three before I quickly lifted my legs, then bent them to my chest. I was in a fetal position, holding myself still and waiting in the darkness for the sounds of loud bangs and crunches to stop. I waited for the ground to stop shaking as everything around me shifted and fell. Dust started to fall on my face and I made another orb of light to see what was going on. The shield was weakening again. I needed to leave now.

## Chapter 13

Closing my eyes, I concentrated on the same image of the clearing outside of the swamp and made a line above me with my finger. An opening appeared. I quickly lifted, climbed and crawled to the other side, just in time before everything came crashing down and dust flew through the opening before it closed. I lay on my back relieved to be alive. Then I turned when I heard the anguished cry of my name being called. It came from my left. I didn't want to follow the sound. I just wanted to stay here and rest but my name kept ringing in my ear. So I pushed myself up, winced at the pain in my right leg, and limped a few steps until I found the source. It was Wolrik. Merigold and two of his men were trying to restrain him from going back into the castle that was crumbling.

I called out to him but he couldn't hear me. He finally pulled free of them and was running to the castle. I looked around and found a pebble. Using my magic to make sure my aim was on target, I threw it at his back. He kept moving. I threw another one, then another until he stopped. I called out to him and threw another pebble at him. When he started to search, I waved my arm and was relieved when he spotted me. He ran, knelt down in front of me, and hugged me hard against him. I tried to pry myself away, but he wouldn't let go until I told him I needed to breathe. Then he relented. He quickly got up and started to pace back and forth. I watched him until the others came and hovered around me.

"We all thought you were dead," Merigold said while smiling at me. I could see the relief in his eyes.

As much as I hated him and his men, I was glad to see that they came out of this alive.

"It's right. We though ye perished in there," one man said and nodded to the castle that was now a big pile of rocks. "It took all of us to pull him out and to keep him from goin' back in."

"Just barely," another one said. "Never met a man so set on killin' himself."

"With good reason," Merigold added.

Wolrik pushed them away to get to me. He looked angry now. He grabbed the front of my shirt with both hands and lifted me slightly up until our faces met.

"Do not ever do that again," he said through clenched teeth.

"What are you talking about?" I had no idea why he was so angry. If anything, I should be the one who was mad at him.

"You know damn well what I am talking about. Never push me away while putting yourself in danger again," he roared while shaking me.

I tried to uncurl his fingers from my shirt, but they did not budge. I sighed and grabbed a fist full of his shirt and looked at him.

"You prefer that I let you stay there and die?"

"Yes—No, dammit. I could have gotten you out. The both of us could have come out of it alive."

"You may not have noticed, but I am alive. The walls and ceiling were coming down. My legs were trapped. What makes you think anyone could be saved in a situation like that? I did what I had to do to keep at least one of us alive and I will do it again. You would have done the same thing," I shouted. "Now let go of me. My leg hurts and you, putting me in this position, is not helping to ease the pain."

My last words brought him back from his haze of anger. He gently placed me down to the ground and was about to touch my leg when I screamed.

His head whipped back up to look at me. "I have not even touched you yet."

"Sorry, sorry. Just preparing myself for more pain"

He grabbed my hand and numbness went through me. I looked at him in surprise. He got his magic back, too.

"After the castle went down," he said to me as if reading my thoughts. He moved his hand down

my leg, I cringed and prepared myself for the pain, but nothing happened.

“Your leg is broken. I have to set it before bracing it.” He turned to one of them. “Find me something to brace her leg and something to tie it with.” He turned back to me. “This will hurt,” he said, emphasizing the word hurt and slightly looking over his shoulders at the others.

I looked up to see them hovering behind him. One of them handed me a stick.

“Best ter bit this down, Lass.”

I took it and placed it between my lips. I faked at being in pain while Wolrik bounded my leg. After it was set, he lifted me up into his arms. Then the ground started shaking.

“We best be off before the whole place goes,” Merigold said and picked up a sack. The others did the same.

“What are you guys carrying?” I asked.

“Turns out the witch had gold stashed in her castle,” he said and winked at me before leading the way back to the ship.

We met most of the crew that had come with us to the island. As Wolrik had predicted, they were taken to a cell. When the castle began to fall apart, most were able to escape. Wolrik waited until we were the last to move out and deliberately lagged behind. When he felt we were far enough behind, he quickly made an opening and went through. The place was dark and cold. I couldn't see anything in front of me. He set me down, keeping one arm around my waist to steady me. With his other hand, he created an orb of light that grew to the size of a basketball. I watched in surprise. I didn't know we were able to increase the size of the orb. I had thought it was limited to the size of our palms. He gave it a little push and it floated above us and I was able to see we were in a cave.

“How did you know there was a cave here?”

“I found it while I was one of Keya's men.”

The ground started to shake again.

“What's happening? Why did the castle fall?”

“Keya. Something must have happened to her. This castle and the land around it are connected to her. If she dies, the whole place goes with her.”

“You make it sound like it is part of her.”

“It is. This place was created by her with magic. That is how she was able to keep this place undetected.”

“But you were able to find it.”

“It is only because I have been here many times before. I made sure I studied and memorized the area in case I had to come back again.”

“So, she is dead?”

“Possibly. Or she needed more magic and is absorbing the magic she placed here. The whole place will crumble and sink to the ocean soon. We still have time though. Stay here,” he said.

I grabbed his hand before he could leave. “Where are you going?”

“Merigold has the stone. I need to get it back.”

“I will go with you.”

“You are hurt. It is best that you stay here.”

“Not a problem,” I said with a smile. I bent down, touched the injured area and concentrated. After a couple of seconds, I unfurled the brace and lightly put some weight on it. No pain. I then jumped up and down. Still no pain.

“All better,” I said to him.

He looked at me with one of his indecipherable stares that always unnerved me.

“Lets go,” I said.

He grabbed my arm, stopping me from moving further.

“Please, Cass, no arguments this time. Stay here where I know you will be safe. Please.”

I saw something in his eyes—fear and something else I couldn't put into words. My near-death had

affected him. For once, I did not argue with him.

“Hurry back. The sooner you get the stone, the sooner I can go back home and put this all behind me.”

I could tell that my words hurt him. He was about to say something.

“I am still mad at you for lying to me and making me distrust you.”

“I know,” he said with regret. “I am sorry.”

“Be careful, Wolrik,” I said and turned my back to him.

I listened to the sound of his footsteps moving away.

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Merigold slammed the door to his cabin. They had escaped. He cursed himself for not paying more attention to them, thinking that Wolrik would not try anything with Cass being hurt. But he was wrong. He wanted to search some more, but his men were restless and after what happened to them on the island, they were eager to leave the place. It was a stupid and foolish mistake. One he would not make when he found them again. He quickly turned when he realized he wasn't alone. Wolrik was there, leaning on his desk.

“Where is she?” Merigold said as he turned and walked over to his cabinet to pour himself a glass of liqueur.

“None of your concern,” Wolrik replied.

He smiled and turned around with a pistol in his hand. “I would like to see her, to make sure she is all right.”

“I came here to get the stone.”

“How about a bargain? I will give you the stone and my share of the witch's gold if you give me Cass.”

“I have told you. She is not for sale.”

“And I have told you. Everyone has a price.”

“Not her.”

“Well then, I guess we have nothing to discuss.”

Merigold fired at him but Wolrik was ready. Using his magic he moved the bullet just slightly, while it was still in the air, to only graze his upper arm. He moved it just enough so that Merigold would not suspect anything and instead believed he missed his mark by a few inches. But the man was surprised and narrowed his eyes in suspicion. He knew he was a very good shot and the bullet should have hit its mark. He was distracted by the thought and didn't see Wolrik coming at him before it was too late. He was punched in the face with enough force that he had to take several steps back and tripped over a chair. While he was trying to right himself, he lost his grip on the pistol. Wolrik was already on him, pulling him up and slamming him to the wall.

“Where is the stone?”

“Kill me and you will never know.”

Wolrik pushed him to the ground, took a pistol behind his back and aimed it at him. The man then watched with curiosity as Wolrik stood still with his eyes closed. After a few moments, he went straight to the cabinet, felt around the bottom shelf and opened a secret compartment where the stone was hidden.

“How did you know where to look? Are you a witch also?”

Wolrik did not respond. He grabbed the stone and was about to leave when he sensed something. He turned and walked over to a wall. He closed his eyes and placed his palm on the wall and slowly felt around until he hit a spot. He then looked slightly to his left and pulled down on an ornament that was nailed to the wall. Another secret compartment opened, right in the area where his palm was. There was a book there. When he took it out, he realized it was a book of blood magic.

“Who are you? How could you possibly have known that I have that book and where to look for

it?” Merigold demanded.

Again Wolrik ignored him as he took the book and walked over to the door.

“I will find her.”

Wolrik stopped then, turned and said, “I highly doubt it.”

When the door closed behind him, Merigold felt his body relax. Before it was stiff and immovable. It never occurred to him that he couldn't move. Now that he thought of it, there were a couple of times he could have overtaken Wolrik when his back was turned. But why didn't he? He quickly ran outside and saw his men going about their business. Wolrik was gone. How could he have possibly left the ship without his men noticing? When he asked them if they had seen the man, they all said no. Even the ones that he had assigned to guard the ship said they hadn't seen any sign of Wolrik. As Merigold walked back to his cabin, he slowly replayed the scene. The bullet that never hit its mark. He knew his limitations; he would not have missed from that distance. The secret compartment that Wolrik was able to pinpoint without hesitation. Then he looked towards the island and replayed the scene there. Those creatures and the vine that came alive. Then there was Wolrik who appeared out of nowhere when the castle started to fall. Merigold was positive that both of them had gone into the castle and had not come out of there. He had his men standing guard to make sure to capture them if they did. Then Cass also appeared out of nowhere. And there was her leg. He had thought she only pretended to be hurt, to distract Wolrik from his anger. But now he wondered if she really was hurt and somehow, she was healed. Something was very wrong and he intended to find out what it was.

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When I couldn't hear his footsteps any longer I turned. I was still staring at the entrance when I heard a voice behind me.

“Well, well. Are we having a lovers quarrel?”

I turned around and looked into the darkness. “Who's there?” I demanded.

The orb of light above me burst into flames and swirled around in a tight circle before spreading outward, hugging the ceiling until it reached the figure in the darkness. I could see then. Pix stood half in the dark and half in the light with a menacing smile on her face. The ground started to shake as dust and small pieces of rock fell to the ground. Her clothing was covered in blood and she had a knife in one hand. When I looked down further I saw Norus lying there dead and mutilated at her feet. I took an in take of breath and covered my mouth, forcing myself to stay calm.

“What did you do to him!” I demanded.

“I needed more magic,” she said.

I screamed and fell to my knees. My whole body felt like it was being crushed from the inside.

“I don't have the stone,” I said with each gasp of air.

“I know. I heard your conversation with Wolrik. I am here to kill you.”

I screamed again as the pressure got worse.

She came forward and knelt beside me. “This is what will happen. I am going to kill you and frame Norus. Wolrik will be devastated and I will be there to mend his wounds. Over time you will be a faint memory to him and I will be by his side forever as it should be.”

I laughed. “How are you going to pull that off? He knows who you are. Do you really think he will trust you after what you did here?”

“Oh, you naive girl. You really are a fool. And they told me you were the reincarnation of Keya. You might have her soul but you have none of her brains.” She bent down closer to me. “Do you know what my gift is? It is the gift of remembrance.”

Suddenly my head was on fire. She got up and smiled down on me. “I can retrieve thoughts and memories. I can erase them or create another one. All I have to do is wait for Wolrik to come back, erase his memories of me and plant new ones. Memories with us happily in love. Maybe I will erase any trace of you from his mind. Imagine that. You will die knowing he never knew you even existed.”

“No!” I shouted. Ignoring the pain, I forced myself to focus my energy and concentration and I flung my arm wide. She flew back, hitting the wall of the cave. I extended my hand out towards her and squeezed. She screamed.

“If anybody is going to erase me from their memories, I will be the one to do it,” I said while I squeezed my hand again. She screamed even more. “It’s not fun when you are the one feeling the pain.”

I walked up to her, watching her trying to move away from me while moaning in pain. The ground shook again and I stumbled but kept my balance and kept moving forward to her.

“I will kill you!” she screamed.

“Not today,” I said before placing my finger to her temple. She crumbled to the ground in a dead faint.

I stumbled again when the ground shook. This time it went on longer and with more force. More rocks and dust fell. When it subsided, I sat down next to her exhausted. That was how Wolrik found me. He rushed over and knelt down in front of me.

“Are you all right?” He stroked my hair.

When I nodded he glanced at Pix and asked what happened.

“She tried to kill me, but I was able to overpower her. She is asleep now.”

He helped me stand and that was when he saw the body. He went over to examine it.

“She killed him,” I said as calmly as I could and failed. I could hear the quiver in my voice. My eyes started to water as I blinked rapidly trying to get rid of the tears that threatened to spill out. I didn’t want to cry. I didn’t want to feel anything. One would think that after all I had been through, a dead body would not have bothered me. But I couldn’t pull myself together to stay calm.

He quickly came over to me and wrapped his arms around me. I didn’t even realize I was cold and shaking until I was wrapped in his arms, embraced in his warmth. I held on as tightly as I could until I was ready to face the reality, the dead body and Pix who tried to kill me. When I loosened my grip on him, he lifted my chin to stare into my eyes, assessing me before a look of relief spread across his face. The ground shook again. He grabbed me, pushed me to a wall and covered me with his body until it stopped.

“We need to leave now. The whole place is starting to go,” he said.

It was then I noticed he was holding a book.

“What is that?” I pointed at the book.

“It is nothing. Only a book that belongs to my people. I do not know how it came into Merigold’s possession and I did not stay to find out.”

“Did you get the stone?”

He took it out of his pocket and handed it to me. I looked at it with relief. Finally, this mission was coming to an end.

“I don’t suppose we could leave her here,” I said to him when he walked over to where Pix was lying.

“I am afraid not.”

“What will we do with her?”

Before he could answer, I was slammed to the wall. I couldn’t move. Wolrik was also having trouble moving. He was in the same position, bent over to pick Pix up from the ground. Though now, there was no need. I watched her sit up, place both hands to the side of his head, and close her eyes.

I struggled to move but with no luck.

“What are you doing to him?” I demanded.

She didn’t answer. She was as still as he was. I kept struggling, trying to break free without any luck. Soon, she opened her eyes and came to sit next to me.

“What have you done to him?”

“I told you. I erased his memory of me. He and I will get a new start.”



The ground shook again and the floor cracked open. She scrambled out of the way before she fell into it. My feet dangled from the edge of the crack. She was distracted and her hold on me weakened. I could move my hand, the hand that held the stone. I knew I was going to die and I wasn't going to let her have it. I concentrated on making a small opening where my hand that held the stone was. The image that I formed in my mind was my court at Edeon. When I felt the opening was big enough for the stone to go through, I let it go and lightly pushed it through and then quickly closed the opening. I saw her coming from the side, where the ground was still solid. She turned my face around and I stared into her eyes.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

She gave me a big smile that sent shivers down my spine. “Do not worry. I have changed my mind. I am not going to kill you. I want you to live, to know everything that happened here and to watch in misery and alone in love with Wolrik as he and I are together. I will make you my slave, bound to me, controlled by me, and you will watch as the person you love will never be yours.”

“How are you going to do that?”

“By controlling your mind, of course. I have enough power now and will have more once I get Keya's magic. You will be bound to me forever.”

## Chapter 14

“Cass.” Someone urgently called out to me. “Cass!”

I blinked several times and focused on Wolrik, who was leaping over me. I held on to him as the ground shook. He hauled me up to my feet and dragged me away from the crack on the floor. I was unsteady and had to rely on him to keep me standing. My head was pounding and it felt like the whole world was spinning.

“What happened?”

“I think you were hit by a falling rock. When I came in, you were leaning on the wall half dazed.” He picked me up, then made a line in the air and ran out of the cave before it caved in.

“Where are we going?” I asked when he kept walking.

“To the ship. This whole island is sinking.”

“Wait!” I moved to get down from his arms. He let go and steadied me.

“We cannot wait. The ship is sailing. If we are not on board, we will be stuck here.”

“I don’t think that is a good idea.”

“We have no choice. There was a doorway in that cave that could have led us out of Keya’s island and into Edeon. But since the doorway is gone, we will have to hide out on his ship until we hit land.”

“Why can’t we go home from here? We don’t need the ship now that we have our magic.”

“I can only lead within a five-mile radius. We would end up in the open sea.”

I closed my eyes and concentrated. I was still nauseous but I could think a little more clearly now. I formed an image of my cort and made a line in the air. An opening formed, showing us his home at a distance instead. It was not what I had pictured, but I wasn’t going to complain. We went through just in time before the ground collapsed on the other side. We stood watching as the opening closed. I was the first to move. Ignoring Wolrik, I turned and headed for my cort. I sighed in relief once I was inside my door.

The mission was done. It was finally over.

The first thing I did was go over to the wardrobe and took out my uniform, the one that I wore when I came to this timeline. Xena had given it to me when I started working with them on tracking and capturing creatures. I reached in to one of the pockets and took out my necklace. I had left it behind because I was afraid I was going to lose it while we went searching for the stone. Plus, I had no use for it since my magic, at the time, was gone. Now that I had it back, I placed it into the crystal. Once that was done, I went straight to bed.

I wish I could say that I slept peacefully but I didn’t. Again, I dreamed of the garden, the sound of a waterfall nearby and my training with Master Xin. When I woke up the next morning, I was surprised to see food on the table and also the knife Wolrik had given me. I ate everything that was set in front of me and was about to go outside when there was a knock on the door. I got up and felt my foot hit something. It was the stone and I wondered how it got here. I must have hit my head harder than I thought. I couldn’t seem to remember. But then...There was someone with me in the cave. Wolrik...? He came and handed me the stone. No wait. Two figures: one standing and one on the ground. Then a face...Pix! I remembered now! The knock sounded again. I opened to see Wolrik standing by the door. I was about to tell him what I remembered when someone called out his name. Both of us turned to see a person running towards us. He was wearing a uniform that was unfamiliar to me. He looked like he had just come from a battle. His hair was in disarray and there was a red substance on his dusty torn clothes and on his hands that looked suspiciously like blood.

“Wolrik, I am glad you are back. Our lord requests your assistance. I was sent here to get you.”

The man looked at me and nodded in greeting. He was either used to outsiders being in their home or in too much of a hurry to think about why a stranger was here. Wolrik looked my way and I could

tell he was thinking of what to do with me.

“I could help,” I offered.

He knew I had magic and had seen a bit of what I could do, yet he was hesitating. After a couple of seconds, he pushed me back. “Stay here,” he ordered before closing the door.

I quickly opened it, just in time to see the place they stepped into. I went back in and changed into my uniform. I took out my necklace and wore it around my neck. I transferred some of the magic that was within the crystal to me just in case I ran into any difficulties when I got to the place Wolrik went to. I concentrated on that image and made the opening.

I was high up on a cliff and below, at a distance, a battle was raging. The air was dry, thick with an ominous scent of magic. It felt like all of my senses were opened and absorbing the pain, suffering, despair, and everything that was evil and negative. It suffocated me to a point where I could hardly breathe. The area was barren of all life; a desert with high cliffs, rocks and stones everywhere. An explosion was heard not too far from me. I skidded and slid down to the bottom and turned to see most of the Elvains trying to move some rocks from an area of the hill. I ran to the first person closest to me and asked him what was going on.

“Our wounded are trapped inside,” he shouted over the noise. He suddenly grabbed me and dragged me a few feet away before a bomb exploded where we had just been standing. The explosion pushed us to the ground and it took me a while to get my bearings. When I realized the guy who saved me wasn’t moving, I rolled him over, felt for a pulse, and was relieved that he had one. I closed my eyes to feel where he was hurt. There was a pain in his head and I slowly healed it. When I opened my eyes, he was starting to come to.

Two others came to help us and tried to pull us to cover, but it was too late. There was a giant blue swirling sphere of electricity about to hit us. At the last minute, I held up my hands and screamed. When nothing happened, I slowly opened my eyes to see it was hovering a couple of inches above us. It was huge, about the size of a minivan, and probably weighed as much. I had to look away from the brightness it was emitting and I could feel the heat and the static charge coming from it. Then I saw it: a faint trail that went from the sphere all the way out to the far distance.

I gave a small smile.

“I’ve got you,” I whispered, before I took two steps back. The sphere followed me. I let go.

Like a slingshot, it zipped back, following the trail of the faint light until a couple of minutes later, a bright orange fire burst into the sky. It had hit its target. I was surprised that I was able to do this. I shouldn’t have, since I had never done something like this before. I had never stopped a giant sphere of electricity or any huge objects and controlled its movements. But then, I knew next to nothing about this magic. When I had asked Xena about it once, she said she wasn’t sure herself, only that Keya was able to do a lot with it, more so than anyone of them could. I mostly watched others and mimicked them or, in this situation, I discover it by accident.

I looked up to see another one coming. This one was from another point of origin and heading to the area where everybody was working on removing the rocks. There was not enough time to warn them. I reached out as if trying to grab it. At the last minute it changed direction and headed my way. I stopped it, as I did before, and again, I could see a faint trail. I repeated my movement and it shot back to the place where it had come from. When that was done I asked the guy that I had first met here and whom I called Henry since I didn’t know his real name why didn’t they just make an opening instead of removing the rocks. He told me that they were too far away. I quickly ran to the area where everyone was working.

“Quick, show me the interior of the cave,” I said to the closest person.

A man looked at me in shock, as if I appeared out of nowhere. Before I could repeat myself, another sphere of electricity came at us. This time I was ready and it was easier. I waved my arm and it flew back to where it came from.

I grabbed the man and shook him a little.

“An image,” I demanded.

Someone turned me around. Henry placed two fingers to my temple. An image appeared as quickly as it faded. I thanked him. Another one of those spheres of electricity came our way. I swung my arm at it, not bothering to see if it hit its mark and made an opening and then held on to its side to prevent it from closing. Several people went through and started bringing people out. Henry took two crystals out of his waistband pouch and placed them on each side of the opening.

“They will hold it open,” he explained before going through it himself to help the others.

I stood outside in case any more of those things flew over us again. I walked over to the edge and watched the battle below. I did not know which side was ours and which side was the enemy. From my vantage point, they all looked like a swarm of ants. I turned at the sound of someone screaming and placed both hands on my mouth when I saw a humungous creature with a human body, two legs, and two arms walking upright. It had huge muscles like a body builder. It was hunched over and had a canine face with a huge snout and long, sharp teeth like a piranha. It reminded me of a werewolf without any fur except for a long streak of hair that ran from the top of its forehead down to its shoulders.

The thing had claws and it started swiping at anyone who got in its way. It grabbed someone, bit him in half and threw one half at the people below while eating the other half. I closed my eyes, turned around and placed my hand on my mouth, trying not to throw up. I could hear the cries of horror and pain from the others. I could smell the blood and the fear mixed in with the ominous smell of the air around us. And I could taste the bile lingering in my throat. I couldn't hold it in any longer. Everything I ate before came rushing out of me. I felt tears down my cheeks and I quickly swiped them away. Again with the tears, I thought to myself. When am I going to stop crying! It was all I did since I met the Elvains. Why was I such a baby? I needed to stop! I had been so helpless to do anything or to save anyone. But not anymore—I was stronger and I had my magic. No more crying. No more tears. I had had enough of it to last me a lifetime.

I turned back with despair to see that two more beasts had arrived. The Elvains were barely keeping themselves from getting killed with just one, and now there were two more. I looked around trying to think of what to do, but my mind was drawing a blank. Then something flew past me and I looked to see another one of those things heading directly to the group of people. Then I realized that the monsters were deliberately herding all of the Elvains into one area and the sphere was flying right at them. I held out my hand, took control of it and aimed it at one of the creatures. It roared in pain as its whole body was charged with electrical current. One of them turned to me and started charging. I turned and then cursed. I had forgotten that I was on a ledge. When I turned back, it leaped into the air and I watched in horror as it came at me.

I screamed, covering myself protectively, and the next thing I knew, there was a cry of agony before I felt something solid and heavy knocking me to the ground. I tumbled and then felt nothing; weightlessness. I realized then that I was falling off the cliff. In desperation, I stretched out my hands in an attempt to grab hold of something...anything. All I could feel was air as I descended. Then I was slammed into something solid. My hands clamped on a root of some kind and I held on. I realized to my utter horror and disgust that I was on the back of the creature that pushed me down the cliff. I was holding onto part of its hair. It tried to grab for me and then tried to shake me loose. But I held on and frantically climbed up its body. When I reached the top of its head, I jumped and grabbed hold of a rock that was protruding out of the cliff side and started climbing again. It grabbed my ankle and started pulling me down. I held on as long as I could but the creature was too strong. I dangled upside down as it swung me from side to side. Then it lifted me up until we were eye to eye. I stared into the deep dark abyss of its eyes and felt as though I was looking into perdition. Its mouth was the doorway and it was about to swallow me whole. I screamed and held out my hand. All I could think of was Hell and the everlasting fire. Flames started bursting out of my hands and straight into its face. The creature screamed and let go of me when it lost its footing.

I started falling again. The thought of being splattered on the ground raced through my mind and I prayed for a ledge to break my fall. Suddenly part of the cliff below me began to crumble. A ledge started to protrude out of it and I slammed into solid ground, knocking the breath out of me and probably all of my internal organs with it. I lay there, exhausted and in pain. I knew I had to move but I didn't want to get up. I just wanted to stay there and pretend I was somewhere else. But I couldn't get rid of the stench of this wretched place. I couldn't get rid of the screams of panic and horror. And I couldn't disregard the banging on the wall of the cliff. I rolled over and peered down to see the creature covered in flames climbing upward towards me. I quickly got to my feet. I must have created this ledge unconsciously with my magic and hoped I could do something similar again. Concentrating, I slowly felt and heard the wall of the cliff shifting until parts of it stuck out and I was able to use it to climb up until I was on top. I lifted myself up and then rolled the rest of the way to solid ground. I lay there, heart pounding a mile a minute, trying to catch my breath. I was thankful to be alive.

Then a large fiery hand appeared above me. With what little energy I had left, I scrambled to get away, unable to take my eye off it. But I was too slow and too tired. I turned my head to the side to avoid the heat and the glaring light of the fire. This was it. I was going to be crushed by the hand. And after all of my effort to get up here, I was still going to be a splatter of blood and bones, a blotch on the ground. Just then, someone grabbed me from under my shoulders and dragged me backwards as the hand smacked the ground right by my feet. I let out a long breath of relief and turned my head to see Henry. He effortlessly pulled me to my feet. We both stared as the rest of the creature's burning body rose up from the side of the cliff as if Satan himself was rising from the ground.

"Run!" he shouted at me as he pulled me with him.

"What the hell was that thing?"

"Gurats," he replied.

He then made a line in the air, which I didn't know he could do while running and we went through an opening. I turned to see the creature lunge forward as the opening closed. I turned back and smacked right into Henry. He had taken us back to where the others were. I looked up to see what he was looking at and wished I hadn't. A couple feet away were three Gurats. One was fighting anyone who tried to go past it. The Elvains who tried to escape were being knocked back, eaten, or sliced into several pieces by their claws. I wondered why they were keeping us here, and then I remembered from before. Quickly, I looked up and around us. Behind me, the creature Henry and I had escaped from was still engulfed in flames. It was now standing there with the rest of his kind. Behind it was a sphere of electricity coming towards us. We were blocked on all sides. There was nowhere for us to escape.

I had never been religious. I never took it seriously but at that moment I made the sign of the cross, then grabbed hold of the crystal and absorbed all of the magic that was in it. I had to get to that side but there were too many people to move through and I wouldn't be able to get there in time. I focused on an image, made an opening and stepped through to that side, just in time to grab the sphere of electricity. I held it high up in the air above me and then I moved my arms further apart and watched as the sphere split into four smaller ones. I flung my arms and all four of them flew and hit the four creatures that surrounded us. In union, the creatures roared in agony. They clawed at the electrical current that surrounded and passed through them. Their bodies shook, twitched and convulsed uncontrollably. They crashed down to the ground as they foamed at the mouths. Their eyes bled and smoke rose out of them. As they crawled and reached out their hands toward us, everybody moved out of the way. I couldn't bear it anymore; I had to make it stop. I raised my arms and concentrated. Slowly, icicles started to form on their bodies until they were covered in ice and frozen in place. Unfortunately, it didn't stop the electrical current from flowing through their bodies. In fact, it made it worst. The current sizzled, spiked, and struck out of them and onto the ground as if trying to get free. Everybody moved even farther away. Then the ground shook, followed by loud bangs and roars. In the distance, we saw more of Gurats coming.

"We need to make a shield around us. You stay on this side. When I give the signal, you will put up

a shield around your area,” Henry said.

“Wait!” I called to him, “what’s the signal?”

But he was gone. So, I stood there waiting and watched as everybody ran to either avoid the electricity that was striking out of the frozen Gurats or helping others to get to a safer distance. And a few of them stood waiting for the signal. In a couple minutes a flash of light streaked through the sky, like a flare gun going off. Slowly I saw a lightly tinted red-orange film flowing upward to the sky before it slowly descended to the ground. I held out my hand and created my shield. I was wondering how long we were supposed to keep this going when someone came over holding a crystal.

“Hold on to this and focus your shield to it,” he said.

I did as he instructed and saw the crystal glow. He took it from me and placed it at my feet. The shield stayed up by the crystal. I moved away and looked around me; it covered several feet around us forming a dome. Just then a bolt of electricity came from one of the frozen creatures and headed directly towards me. I ducked. Instead of hitting me, it hit the shield. Several more of these electrical currents were blocked by the shield. Everybody must have been used to this since none of them flinched. I heard the sound of something cracking. I followed the sound and noticed the ice from the Gurat’s frozen body was starting to crack. The sound got louder and faster like a firecracker exploding. The next thing I knew, the creatures shattered into dozens of pieces. Frozen flesh rained down on our shield and the electrical current finally dissipated into the air. The few who remained intact, were bashed away by the new Gurats that came to replace them. They then punched and clawed at the shield with no success. After a while they just stood there, still as stones, waiting for something, maybe for the shield to fade or for more reinforcements.

I walked around, a little dazed at what had just happened and was a little disturbed by their calm and composed demeanor. No one seemed to be bothered by what had just occurred or the fact that there were bits and pieces of frozen flesh lying on the ground around the shield. They were all going about their business. A couple was clustered in one area, standing there as if on guard. Some were moving from one area to another attending to the wounded and most of them were lying on the ground, bloodied and bandaged. Those creatures were attacking the wounded and I wondered why. The injured were no threat. They couldn’t even go back out there to fight. Why waste their time on them?

Henry came up to me and asked me to follow him. We walked over to the area where a group of Elvains was standing around. As we came near, they became quiet and looked at me. One of them had his back to me. When he turned, I was surprised to see it was Wolrik. His face was filled with mixed emotions: anger, guilt, and apprehension. I was about to say something to him when I was distracted by a man who stood up from behind everyone. They all moved out of his way as he walked off with a purposeful stride. I glanced down to where he was kneeling and saw their lord lying on the ground injured. I could see three long and deep claw marks on his chest. Now I knew why those creatures were here. They were after him. No one seemed to object when I knelt down next to their lord. I placed a light touch on his chest and was slammed with a searing hot, intense, agonizing pain. I screamed, unable to let go of him.

## Chapter 15

Someone pulled me away and I landed hard on the ground breathing heavily. I felt sick and nauseous and tasted something foul in my mouth. The awful taste overwhelmed my senses and I started to retch. I tried to get up but dizziness hit me and I went down on all fours. I took deep breaths but I couldn't stop myself from dry heaving several times. Someone placed a hand on my back and I began to feel a calm and soothing sensation spread within me. I stopped retching then and sat up. Wolrik knelt in front of me, touched my face, and the nausea and pain subsided. I felt a little bit normal again.

"Better?" he said in a worried tone.

I nodded and gave him a small smile of thanks. He helped me to my feet but it was still too early to stand. My legs buckled and I went down. He caught me before I hit the ground. He kept me in his arms until I was able to stand on my own.

"I'm okay," I said, more to myself than to the others and then said to no one in particular, "I wasn't prepared for it."

Usually when I healed someone, I could feel the pain. It was never the same amount as the person who was hurt. It was just a mild feeling, maybe only ten percent of what they were going through. If I only felt that much now, it must have been torture for him.

When I felt confident enough to withstand the pain from the wound, I looked at Wolrik.

"No matter what happens, do not pull me away from him."

It took him a minute to understand. He grabbed my arm and pulled me away. I pulled back and stood my ground.

"What are you doing?"

"I am bringing you back home."

"If we don't help him, he will die."

"We will find another way."

"That will take too long and there may not be enough time."

"Dammit, Cass! Why did you have to follow me? You nearly got killed before."

"So you knew I was in danger," I said accusingly.

"Yes. And it almost killed me to stand here and not be able to do anything about it."

I pushed him away, angry that he didn't come to my rescue. "Then why didn't you help me? Why did you just stand here and watched me almost get killed?"

"I cannot."

"Why the hell not?"

"Because it is my responsibility to guard our lord. When I am needed, I have to be by his side no matter what."

"He means more to you that you would lie, deceive, and stand by while I got hurt?"

"We will discuss this later."

He took my hand again and pulled me away. I was furious with him. I placed two fingers on his temple and he fell to the ground. When I turned, all of them were staring at me.

"Not to worry, he is only sleeping," I said.

I went back and knelt down beside their lord. Henry was next to me. I told him the same thing as I told Wolrik before—not to pull me away no matter what. During the time I had been training with Xena she had helped me practice my healing powers. I was not the best student. Most of the Elvains that came to me for healing were frightened and reluctant. Eventually, I got better at it. This was a good thing; their lord needed all the help he could get. I was blasted with pain again. The smell of blood and something else that was just as vile. Now that I was prepared for it, it wasn't as bad as before. I was able to focus more on healing than the pain and suffering he was emitting. I slowly felt around his body

using my senses rather than my hands. Besides the claw marks, he was hit with a sharp object on the chest and his left leg was broken. I healed those easily before moving onto the claw marks.

The gash was as deep as it was wide. He was lucky that it didn't hit any of the vital organs. I frowned when I felt a trace of invisible film around and in the wound, a thick ominous scent of magic. Like the atmosphere around us it felt negative and evil. I wondered why it was only on this particular wound and not the others. I put that question aside for later in order to concentrate on healing him. It was hard to explain how the process of healing a person works. It was different each time, depending on what the injury was. For this particular one, I focused on this ominous scent and slowly moved and dissipated it. Then I concentrated on closing the wound. I encouraged the flesh to move, to grow and to connect until the wound closed and patched itself.

The damage to his body was fixed but he still felt broken. There was still something wrong. I used my senses again to examine him more thoroughly and found the problem. I moved my hand to his head. It felt swollen and hot. I focused my concentration on soothing it and cooled him off. Finally he was healed. I opened my eyes and was glad to see he looked better than before. I stretched, trying to loosen the tightness of my muscles. I got up and would have fallen back down if Henry wasn't there to catch me.

"He is resting now. Let him sleep as long as he can," I said to him.

"Should we wake him up?" he asked while tilting his head to the side.

He was pointing to where Wolrik was; unconscious and on the ground. I cringed, not wanting to face him when he woke up. Henry seemed amused by my predicament.

"Do you need him for anything right now?"

"He is here to protect our lord."

"Right."

He was about to move when I grabbed his arm. "Wait."

I took the time to build my courage to face him. He was going to be angry with me for rendering him unconscious. Then I thought, why should I be afraid of him? I should be angry with him and let myself feel the anger by listing all the reasons why. He was a control freak; he never let me do anything. He thought women were weak—never letting me handle things myself. He lied to me; he didn't tell me the truth about the Sighyn stone and that he was married. And last, he was insensitive; he stood there as those creature tried to kill me.

"Okay," I said to Henry and let go of his arm, "wake him up."

"He wanted to go after you."

"What?"

"He wanted to go and save you when one of the Gurats was after you. It took all of us to restrain him. We could not allow him to leave."

"Why?"

"His duty is to protect our lord."

"And if I died it would be okay with all of you?"

"It is nothing personal. Our lord is very important to us."

I opened my mouth to yell at him. How could he say letting me die wasn't personal, but he had already moved. He went over to Wolrik, knelt down on one knee, and touched his temple. Wolrik was confused for a moment and then sat up when he realized what I did. I could see the anger and determination on his face. Henry placed his hand on his chest, preventing him from moving any further. Then he bent down and whispered into Wolrik's ear. I didn't know what Henry was saying to him and I didn't care. While they were talking, I made a wide berth around them, ignoring his gaze as it followed me. I walked to an area where the pieces of frozen flesh were closest to the shield. I didn't want to do it but I needed to take a closer look at it. I needed to touch it. As morbid as it sounded I had a good reason, a theory, actually. I wasn't sure how the shield worked and I wasn't going to tamper with it just so I could grab a piece of disgusting flesh on a theory.



Instead, I lay down on my side and made a small opening to one of the pieces. I took out my knife and used it to move the flesh over to me. It was still thawing and I cringed and gagged at the smell and how disgusting it was. The inside was still hard but the outside, the skin, was soft. I braced myself for what I was going to do next. Slowly I took one finger and touched it, then snapped it back. I had the same reaction as I did when I felt the wound on their lord's chest. I cringed when I placed my palm on the flesh and concentrated. Just as I thought, it felt like the atmosphere around this area; thick with an ominous scent of magic. It felt like the creature had absorbed the atmosphere around them until it was part of them. When one of the Gurats clawed at their lord, it transferred some of the ominous scent to his wound. I let go then and wiped my hand on the sandy ground and then on my pants. The meat started to move. On instinct, I froze it again before making an opening. Then I used my knife to roll it back out. I stood and turned to see Henry beside me. He had a curious look on his face but was not disturbed by what I had just done. He didn't even ask me what I was doing.

"How long have you been here?" I asked.

"Four months," he said without hesitation.

"Is there someone that was here from the start or close to it, preferably wounded?"

He looked around, then nodded and motioned for me to follow—again without hesitation or suspicion. He didn't even ask why. I realized that the ones who were hovering over the injured were attending to them but not healing them.

"Where are the healers?"

"They are below where the battle is."

"Why are they not here?"

"They take care of the ones on the battlefield. The injured who are easily mended stays behind so they may go back into battle when they are healed. The critical ones are stabilized before transported to us. Most of us here have a level one magic and is trained in attending to wounds."

He stopped in front of a man lying on the ground. One of his legs was gone from the knee down. His arms were burned and he had a patch on one eye. Henry had turned and left before I could thank him. I sat down next to his mutilated leg. Lightly I touched the end of his bandaged knee. The bleeding had stopped but the bandage was still damp. I concentrated and felt nothing; there was no ominous scent of magic that I had felt on their lord's wound and on pieces of flesh from one of the creatures. It was just the usual feelings I got when I touched a wound. Slowly I patched his leg. I couldn't make another leg for him but I could speed the healing process until the flesh was covered with skin. I took the gauze off since he didn't need it anymore and I placed my hand on his chest. Again I didn't sense anything.

I was about to heal his arm when a hand stopped me. It was Henry.

"Our lord is awake and would like to speak with you."

"Okay, just let me finish here and—"

"What he has are flesh wounds and he will live. Do not exert yourself anymore." He held up a hand when I was about to protest. "It will not do us any good if you faint from exhaustion. Our healers would have been resting now after saving our lord."

I relented, too tired to argue. He led me back to where their lord was and where Wolrik stood, sulking and none too happy to see me. At least he wasn't angry or yelling at me. All of us sat down, Wolrik on one side of me and Henry on the other. A man that I hadn't met sat next to Henry, then their lord, who was facing me, then an older gentleman on his left. We sat there in a circle on the ground while three men stood guard above us.

"Wolrik informed me that you saved my life. I am in your debt," their lord said to me.

"I am glad that I was able to help."

He nodded and then introduced me to the people sitting with us. Peyliar was the person on his left, Bataly was the person on his right, and Valter was the person I called Henry.

They all lowered their heads in greeting. I did the same. Valter passed a sack of what I thought was

water. I took a deep gulp of it before spitting it out and coughing uncontrollably.

“This is not water,” I said hoarsely between each cough.

They all laughed at my outburst.

“It is wine. You had it before,” Wolrik said in all seriousness as he patted my back.

Red-faced from the coughing and embarrassment, I looked at him and was glad to know that he wasn't laughing but concerned. It was a good thing since he was already on thin ice with me.

“Drink slowly this time,” he said as he handed the pouch back to me.

I took several small sips. He then handed me a palm-sized flatbread. I didn't realize how hungry I was until I took a bite of it. I looked above us at the creatures that were still outside, still as statues, standing guard. I stared up at one of them—hard not to when it was right in front of me. I moved from side to side and I swore their eyes were following me. I wondered if these live ones also emitted that ominous scent that was hovering in the air. And if so, what did that mean? Then I wondered what was causing those odors in the air. Had this place always been like this or did someone turn it into what it was? When I looked back down, I saw their lord staring at me as if waiting for something.

“I'm sorry, did you say something?”

“You were saying the Gurats was emitting an ominous odor similar to the air around us. Would you be so kind as to elaborate?”

“Sorry, I did not realize I was talking out loud.”

“It is all right. I am curious as to your meaning. Valter told me that you retrieved one of the creatures...parts to study. I would like to know what your findings are.”

I fidgeted as all eyes were on me, then cleared my throat and started with the claw marks on his chest. When I was done they were quiet and in thought. After a couple of minutes, their lord whispered something to Bataly. He got up and left. Their lord then turned to Valter and whispered to him before he also got up and left. But he came back a while later. I was curious as to what he told the two of them. Then their lord stood.

“Thank you, Cass, for confirming my suspicions. I now know how to win this battle,” he said.

“What did I say that will help you?” I asked.

“The ominous odor that you have been sensing. It is in the air and in those Gurats. I believe they feed off of these odors and the creatures on the battlefield as well. If we can get rid of the odor, we can destroy the creatures,” he answered and nodded to all of us before leaving.

I quickly got up and walked over to him.

“Where are you going?”

“I am needed at the battlefield. I have already stayed away too long.”

“Is Wolrik going with you?” Though I was still mad at him, I was worried for him.

“He has another assignment to attend to,” he assured me.

“But I thought he is here to protect you.”

“I no longer need his protection, at least for now.”

I was going to say something else when he interrupted. “Cass, my apologies. I must go now.”

He took out a crystal, made an opening and went through it. I turned and bumped right into Wolrik. He placed both hands on my shoulders to steady me.

“We better go,” he said.

“Where are we going?”

“Back home.”

“What about these people? We can't leave them here. Those creatures are still out there waiting.”

“We will be all right as long as the shield holds,” Valtar said.

His assurance did not relieve me of my worries. I did not know why they were so blasé about the whole situation. I looked at the injured around me. What would happen if the shield were gone? They would have zero chance of surviving. Didn't they care? Had they already marked them for death because they no longer could fight?

Wolrik turned to him and said, "We can take all of them back with us."

He had felt my concerns and worries, and I was grateful for that.

"All of the opals we used for transport are being used on the battlefield."

I didn't hesitate and made a line in the air. The line opened and their home appeared. I noticed Valtar nodding to himself as if his suspicions were confirmed. He then stared at me with caution and alertness, trying to figure out what my intentions were. Wolrik moved in front of me, blocking his view of me.

"We better get started," he said, a hint of warning in his voice.

I didn't know what was going through their minds as they stood there staring at each other. But after a while, Valtar turned and started ordering the evacuation. I was holding the opening as the injured passed by. Wolrik was standing guard over me, but I didn't understand why. The Elvains who saw what I did glanced my way with hostility. I was shocked by their attitude. Wolrik held me close and I didn't protest. Their looks were unnerving and his nearness gave me some small comfort.

"What was that all about?" I asked him when we were back home. "Why were they looking at me like I was the devil or something as sinister?"

"It is nothing you need to worry about," he said as he pulled me away.

I pulled back and said, "You need to stop treating me like a child and tell me why."

He was quiet. I could tell he didn't want me to know, but after several minutes of glaring at him, he sighed.

"It is your magic."

"Yes." I said, getting impatient.

"None of us, even those with the highest level of magic, are able to bring us here from where we were without an opal."

I frowned, not understanding. Then as if a light bulb lit up in my head, I remembered Loquis from my timeline had told me that only a person who used blood magic, by killing others in order to gain more magic, was the one that could do what I did, to make an opening anywhere with no limitations. So they all thought I was some evil witch who had killed to gain my magic. And they were currently at war with Keya who had done the same thing. Well, wasn't that just great. Had they forgotten my help with those giant electrical spheres or those Gurats? And what about how I saved their lord? Didn't that count for anything?

"Is that why your lord didn't want my help?"

Again he was quiet and looked away.

"Do you think I am evil and can't be trusted? Is that why you didn't let me come with you?"

His head whipped back to me, insulted by my question. "You know that is not true. The reason I did not want you to be there is because I do not want to see you hurt."

"Okay, I could understand that. What I don't understand is why you don't trust me. You should have told me everything from the first moment we kissed, and I mean the first time, near the Sonjuna flowers," I said to him before walking away. I had enough of them to last me a lifetime.

"Where are you going?" He grabbed my arm.

I wrenched it away.

"To my court."

"I will walk with you."

I turned around and held out my hand to stop him.

"That is okay. I know the way."

"I will accompany you," he insisted.

He was trying my patience. "Look, I am tired, hungry, and really need a shower. All of you are driving me crazy and all I want is to go back to my timeline. You guys don't want me here, which is fine with me because I don't want to be here either." I made an opening and the room I was staying in appeared on the other side. "I just want to remind you and you can also let your lord know that I was

not the one who wanted to come here in the first place,” I said before stepping through.

## Chapter 16

I was angry at the injustices of it all. I was trying to help. I was doing them a favor and this was how they treated me. I screamed in frustration and plopped down on the bed wondering when or how I was going to get home. It was late in the afternoon when I woke up. There was food on the table and a big tub of water for bathing. The water was warm to the touch and the food was as well. Someone must have left it here a while ago. I was famished and ate everything on the plate. Then I washed up and changed into clean clothes.

I did not go out but stayed in my room. I didn't want to see anyone and I certainly did not want to see Wolrik. After a while my eyes started to droop and I went back to bed. It was the middle of the night when I woke up again. Wolrik was lying next to me with his arms wrapped around me. I hated myself to admit it that I was glad he was there. I liked being in his arms.

"Wolrik," I said as I lightly elbowed him in the stomach to wake him up. He stirred and nuzzled my neck. I turned around and looked at him. "I'm still mad at you."

He sighed and closed his eyes. "I know, Cass," he said and was sound asleep soon after.

I woke up alone in bed the next morning. My clothes from yesterday were washed and draped over a chair. When I stepped outside the place was deserted.

I went to the lake, took off my clothes, and dived into the water. I did a couple of strokes before going under and just stayed there. I loved to do this whenever I went swimming. I would sink down into the deep and just float there for as long as I could hold my breath. It had always upset and alarmed my parents, but I couldn't help it. I loved the feeling of weightlessness as if I was gliding in the air. I loved the feel of the cold water pressing down on me as if my whole body was wrapped in a cool blanket. Sometimes I would look up into the sky. It always looked murky and distorted as if I were in a dream, awake and conscious but dreaming.

When I came back up Von was there, sitting on a rock and letting his feet dangle in the water. It was awkward, at least for me, to see him alive, solid, and unaware of his fate. Then a sense of guilt ran over me. I went back under again and let the cold back in. How selfish of me to have forgotten about him when I was on my mission, when I was with Wolrik. I felt ashamed of my betrayal. What kind of person was I to turn on him like that, to be with another man when he was still alive?

"I heard that you were back and I wanted to see you," he said when I resurfaced. I could hear the uncertainty in his voice, afraid I would not welcome him.

"I am glad to see you too, Von."

He smiled at me and started kicking his legs in the water.

"Turn around."

His smile went out. "Why?"

"I would like to get out of the water."

His face reddened. Smiling sheepishly, he got up and turned around. I swam to shore and dressed.

"You can turn around now."

He turned and sat back down. I went over and sat next to him. We stayed quiet for while, enjoying the silence.

"I heard people talking about you," he said after a while.

"Oh, what did they say?"

He hesitated.

"If it is going to get you into trouble, then you don't have to tell me."

"I am not afraid."

"Then what is it?"

"I am afraid you will be hurt by it."

"I will be okay. I think I might have an idea of what they are saying about me," I said, smiling.

"Then is it true? Did you acquire your magic through blood magic?"

I was quiet for a moment, unsure of how to explain. With all the hostility and distrust around me because of this magic, and the fact that they were at war with Keya, I didn't think it was wise to tell him the truth. But I didn't want to lie to him.

"This magic was created by blood magic. But I am not its creator. I inherited it from a powerful and evil witch."

He was looking at me when I answered his question. He turned and nodded in understanding.

We lapsed back into silence. After a couple of minutes, he turned to me with determination in his eyes. "I will protect you, no matter what happens."

I smiled at him and felt a little tug in my heart. "Thank you, Von. But it would make me feel better if you took care of yourself."

"I know I am just a child—"

I placed a hand on his to stop him. "It is not because you are a child. I know for a fact that you are more than capable of protecting anyone. It is just that I don't want anyone hurt because of me."

"You are worth it," he said with certainty.

I looked away, saddened by his stubbornness and the knowledge that no matter what I said, he would never give up.

"Did I offend you in any way in your timeline?"

I turned around in surprise.

"I heard you talking at the meeting when we first met. Do not worry. Mirra and Shuron do not know the truth about where you came from."

"Why did you ask that question?"

"Every time you see me, you look sad. Did I hurt you?"

I shook my head. "No. You reminded me of someone I used to know."

"Did you love him?"

"Yes, very much, but I never got a chance to say it at the time."

"Do you think you will ever love me? When you go back, I will be old enough."

I was about to reply when Wolrik came over to us. He was not pleased to see both of us.

"Why are you here?" His question was directed at Von.

"I came to see Cass when I found out that she was here."

"You should not be outside. You know the rules."

"Yes, I know, Wolrik. I will go now."

"I will not let Tessira know about this."

"Do as you will. I have no shame in breaking the rules this time," he said in defiance before walking away.

I bit my lip as I watched him leave. How could I convince him to let go? Should I let him know of his future with me? Would he care? He didn't before when I met him the first time. He had already known I would be responsible for his death. What should I do?

Wolrik moved in front of me, blocking my view and my thoughts. He lightly tugged on my lower lip to free it from between my teeth. His thumb lightly smoothed out the indentation that my teeth had made.

"You must not worry about him."

"How can you say that? Have you forgotten about what I told you?"

"I have not, Cass. I remember everything. He is destined to die in order for you to live."

"Then you know that I just can't stand by and watch it happen. I have to find some way to keep him alive."

"Cass, you must know that Loquis' visions are never wrong. Everything he sees always comes true no matter how we try to change it."

“I know. I have been through this before but I can’t help wanting to try again.”

He placed a hand on my shoulder. “I am sorry.”

I moved away from his touch. I did not want to be comforted. What I wanted was for Von to live. I had tried once to keep him safe and alive, to change Loquis’ vision, but he died anyway, along with several others. I felt dejected and at a loss as to what to do. I couldn’t save Von. I couldn’t help in their war. What was I supposed to do? I couldn’t even get back to my own timeline. “You should go and help your lord; I will be fine here.”

“He does not need me now. I do not need to go back.”

I turned around and looked at him. “Why aren’t you going back to help? Is it because of your association with me?”

“That is not the reason, Cass. He does not need me now.”

“I don’t understand. If he didn’t need you, why were you even there in the first place? It is not as if someone else can’t protect your lord when he is wounded. Why does it have to be you?”

“It is not only that I have to protect him. If something were to happen to him, I am next in line to take over.”

“So, if he dies, you will be the new lord?”

“Yes.”

“You don’t seem to be too thrilled about it.”

He looked away and started to rub the back of his neck.

“What is it that you are not telling me?”

“My father is from the MilTork clan. I was sent to this clan, the AulTar, to train with his lordship. It has been agreed from the start of my training that if anything should happen to his lordship, I would take over until my replacement. That was before the war started. Now I am the first in line. And by our law, if one member of a clan is to be the lord to another, then he or she must wed a member of that other clan before becoming their lord. Cass, in order to inherit the leadership, I must wed one of his clan. I am to marry Kydiea if he does not live through this war, or when he steps down from leadership.”

“You knew this and you didn’t even tell me when we were on the ship? When we were together?”

“Cass, I—”

“No. Let me get this straight. You have a wife, a betrothed and me, your mistress. How...why...I believed you. I trusted you.”

“Cass, it is not what you think. My marriage with Pixiena was a sham. I had to do it in order to fulfill a mission. I don’t love Kydiea. I love no one but you. I want only you.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. I started to laugh uncontrollably. He looked at me with concern and worry. He probably thought I was going insane and I think I was also. I was insane to have any feelings for him. “I am a fool. I cannot believe I slept with you, to think—is there anything else? No. Don’t answer that. I don’t want to know.”

“Cass—”

“Stop! I don’t want to talk about this anymore. As far as I am concerned we are done and this time I mean us. You have no idea how much you have hurt and betrayed me.”

He grabbed my arm. “Please let me explain. You have to understand.”

“No I don’t!” I shouted and pushed him away.

“Please, Cass—”

I walked away. I did not want to hear any more. I was so angry with him but more so at myself for being a fool and still cared about him even knowing what he had done. I stayed the rest of the day in my cort and the next day wallowing in self-pity. On the third day, I opened the door to see Wolrik on the other side. He looked disheveled and exhausted, matching my own looks and feeling. I stood at the entrance, glaring at him, with my arms crossed on my chest and waited.

“May I come in?”

“No.”

He sighed and started rubbing the back of his neck. “I am sorry.”

I wondered what he was sorry for. There were so many things he had done that needed apologizing. I didn’t want to start up the conversation again. There was nothing he could say to make me forgive him.

When I didn’t reply, he went on. “I know you do not want to see or talk to me but, we still have a mission to finish.”

“What other mission do we have?” I frowned in confusion.

“We need to destroy the Sighyn stone.”

“I am supposed to bring it back to my timeline.”

“We need to destroy it as soon as possible.”

I narrowed my eyes at him wondering why he was in such a rush to get rid of it. “Why? Are you afraid that I will bring Von back to life? Haven’t I proven to you that I can be trusted? What will it take for you to believe me?”

“Cass, you know that is not the reason.”

“No, I don’t.”

“The stone is dangerous if it falls into the wrong hands. We have to destroy it.”

“This stone only brings the dead to life. I don’t see what is so dangerous about that.”

“If one used the right incantations, it can bring all the dead back to life and the one who holds onto the stone will be able to control them.”

“Do they become zombies?”

“What are zombies?”

“You know, the living dead.”

“Are you referring to Vampires?”

My eyes widened.

“Vampires! There are such things as Vampires?”

“No, you—never mind. We are straying from the topic. What I am trying to explain is that the dead will not be able to rest until we destroy the stone.”

“I see. They will keep walking and doing their master’s bidding until the stone is destroyed. They are unstoppable killing machines. That is definitely not good.”

“I do not know what this machine is, but it is unstoppable.”

“How do we destroy it? Blast it to millions of pieces?”

“Dragon’s fire.”

When he didn’t explain further, I said, “Okay. I don’t know what ‘dragon fire’ means. Is that supposed to be a metaphor for something, a name or am I supposed to take it literally?”

Frowning, he ignored my question and went on. “The only way to destroy it is by using the fire of a dragon’s breath.”

“A real dragon blowing fire from its mouth?”

“Yes.”

“Literally it is then.”

He ignored my last comment. “Dragons are all but extinct now—by the hands of your people.”

“Ancestors.”

“The last of his kind resides in China. His name is Zorien.”

“Do you know where in China?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, send me an image and I will take us there.”

“That is not possible.”

“Why not?”

“The place is protected. Anyone using magic to get there will be killed.”



“Then how do we get there? And please don’t say by ship. I had enough of going anywhere over water.”

“I am afraid that is the only way. Unless...”

“Go on.”

“How far can you lead us?”

“You mean how far I can create the opening to?”

He nodded.

“I don’t know.”

He came over and placed two fingers on my temple. An image of a landscape appeared in my mind. I concentrated on that image and made an opening. I was not sure where we were in China, but we were high up in the mountains. The area was filled with deep gullies, high peaks, and forested slopes. The gullies went down for miles and miles before we saw a small sliver of a river. In some areas we couldn’t see anything at all but the clouds that hovered below our feet. The peaks were high and rugged, jutting upwards to the sky, breaking through the clouds as if pointing the way to heaven. The slopes were rich with subtropical vegetation, curious animals, and well-worn paths that guided weary travelers to the temples scattered among the mountains giving solace, spirituality, and sanctuary. I could hear roaring waterfalls in the distance and felt the cool mist caressing my skin. It took us a full day to get to a cave that was on top of the highest mountain. Wolrik took out a green jade that immediately started to glow.

“What is that?”

“A key,” he said before he placed the jade close to his mouth and whispered something under his breath. Suddenly the wall in front of us shimmered. He stepped through and I reluctantly followed him.

## Chapter 17

It felt like I was stepping into Hell. The air was hot, humid and stifling. Everywhere I looked the rocks, the mountains, the ground, the clouds and the sky were bright and tinted red. The landscape looked like it was moving as if this whole place was simmering or boiling—ready to erupt. The closer we got to our destination, the more skeletons of human remains and creatures of unknown origins were scattered on the ground. The floor shook and rumbled and got louder with each step we took.

“Be careful,” Wolrik said to me. “He is coming.”

He pushed me behind him as we walked closer to the entrance of a cave. The atmosphere there was thick with the smell of sulfur. Suddenly fire burst out. He quickly pushed me to the wall, using his body to shield me. I could feel parts of my body that were exposed burning. When I thought I couldn't take it anymore, the fire stopped.

He took out something from his pouch that he wore around his waist. It was a clear round ball with, what seemed to be water inside. Another burst of fire rushed through the entrance of the cave. He threw the ball at the fire. The glass broke and the water within it grew until it consumed the flames. Steam rose up to the sky and a sound of thunder came from the dark cave. The ground started to shake and a sinister sound began to resonate and grow louder and louder. Something was coming.

I was panicking and was surprised to notice that Wolrik was standing there calm and collected, just waiting for whatever was coming. The ground shook even more. The rocks and stones started to tumble and the sinister sound blasted through the air as something fast and huge swept past us like a gust of wind. He turned and I did the same to see a twenty-foot monster before us. He moved to stand on his hind legs, spread his wings, tilted his head up, and blew fire from his mouth. For a minute, the sky was filled with flames. He then hunched down until his snout was right in front of us.

\*It has been a while, Elvain Wolrik. I see you brought a snack.\*

My eyes widened. Not only was he communicating telepathically to me, he thought I was food. I stepped a little to my right, closer to Wolrik.

“Do not frighten her, Zorien. She is under my protection.”

\*Really?\*

He moved his head to the side until his eyes were right in front of me. I flinched at the sight of him. A giant eye fixated on me. I could see every detail. His skin was like a lizard; made of rough dry scales; blue in color. He had red eyes with a golden ring that surrounded a pupil that was so human-like. I shuddered a little by the eerie sight.

\*A Tyrein. What would you need of them? And not even from our time.\*

“She is one of us now. This is Cass of the clan AulTar.”

I turned my eyes to him and thought, ‘I'm one of them? I'm from Shuron's clan? Was this true or was he saying this for the dragon's sake? Do I even care to know? And also, when was he going to tell me that he knew this creature?’ Another secret. The list kept getting longer and longer by the minute.

He moved his head to look at Wolrik. They eyed each other for a couple of seconds before he straightened up and looked down at us.

\*Then I welcome you, AulTar Cass,\* he said as he gave me a slight nod of his head.

I gave a weak smile and nodded back to him. My voice had left me and I have to admit, I was still scared.

\*What brings you here?\* he said to Wolrik.

Wolrik took out the stone and held it up to him.

\*Sighyn stone.\*

“Hopefully the last one we will ever see.”

\*Yesssss.\*

“You are the only one who is able to destroy it.”

\*Lucky me.\*

I watched as the stone flew up into the air until it hovered over the dragon’s palm.

\*A shame to destroy something so lovely as this. Wouldn’t you say, AulTar Cass?\*

I hesitated, not knowing what to say. He took me off guard by addressing me. I was perfectly happy to be ignored throughout their conversation.

“I...I don’t know,” I finally stammered when I realized they were waiting for my answer.

\*An unexpected answer, considering what you lost.\*

“Wh...what do you mean?”

\*Human Cass who holds the Keya crystal. Everyone knows of you.\*

Lucky me, I thought. “How do you know of me? I haven’t been here for that long.”

“This place that Zorien lives is out of time. He is not from my time or yours. This place is between time,” Wolrik explained.

“I don’t understand. What do you mean between time?”

“The simplest way to explain it is that this place flows differently than our world. Time here is irrelevant. The past, the future, and multiple dimensions do not follow a straight line as our worlds do.”

I still did not understand but I let it slide. There were more pressing matters, like getting rid of the stone and getting out of this place.

\*Yessss. I have heard about you, AulTar Cass, throughout history, past and future. It is a pleasure to finally meet you.\*

“Throughout history? Past and future?” I said and thought, what the hell does that mean? I was about to ask when Wolrik stepped in.

“Zorien, can you destroy the stone?”

\*Yessss, of course,\* he said before a stream of fire came from his mouth and to the stone. The stone hovered over his palm for a couple of minutes before it burned itself out. There was nothing left of the it, not even the ashes.

\*If there is nothing else, Elvain Wolrik, I need to feed.\*

“Thank you. I will come back again for a visit once everything is settled.”

The dragon gave him a slight nod before turning to me.

\*AulTar Cass, it has been an honor,\* he said to me before lifting off into the air.

When he was gone, we walked some distance away until it was safe for me to make an opening to his home. I took a huge gulp of cool, refreshing air and sighed with relief once we were back. Not only was I glad to get out of there because of his cryptic and disturbing last words, but also because the atmosphere was overbearing. I noticed that the place wasn’t deserted anymore. There were a few people walking around now. All were wearing battle gear that showed the wear and tear of constant use.

“What’s going on?”

Wolrik had the same question on his mind. He stopped one of them and she told him that it was over, they had finally defeated Keya. Then someone called Wolrik’s name. We all turned to see someone running towards us. Even before he got to us, he called out to let Wolrik know that their lord was requesting his service and he was to come at once. The man took out a crystal from his pouch.

“How did he even know we are here?” I asked but no one answered me.

Wolrik turned and said he would be back. Then he stepped into the place we had been before. I was left alone in the middle of their home watching everyone going about their business. I was walking to my cort when I thought of Loquis. If they had defeated Keya, then that meant he succeeded in killing her. I stopped one of Elvain and asked for directions to where Loquis was staying. When I got there, I hesitated, not knowing if he was back or what to say to him if he was back. The door opened, before I could make my decision. He stood in front of me, not at all surprised to see me. He had changed. He had aged considerably. Years ago he had told me about what had happen during this timeline when he

killed Keya. Because he used up so much of his magic, casting a spell to place Keya's magic into a crystal, he had lost half of his life. When I first saw him in this timeline, he was twenty-eight years old. Now, after his battle with Keya, he looked fifty years old.

"Do not look so sad for me, Cass. I did what was needed to be done. I have no regrets."

"I wish there was another way."

He patted my shoulders and said no more. We both sat down and stayed silent for a while. In that moment, I came to a decision. One that he wouldn't like but I didn't care.

"I will kill you one day."

I would have thought the statement would give him a shock but all he did was give me his knowing smile.

"I know, Cassiea Brenton."

My eyes widened. I was surprised that he knew I was going to kill him in the future and that he knew my full name.

"The first time you hugged me, I had a vision of you."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I was hoping I would never have to but now I think I need to."

"Why?"

"You know the question."

"I would have stopped your death if I couldn't convince you."

"Yes."

"I still am."

"And that is the other reason. I need to stop you."

"Why? Don't you want to live?"

"It will be my time, Cassiea. No one can live forever."

"I'm not trying to make you immortal. I'm trying to prevent killing you."

"The only way to keep me alive is if I killed you first or if you never received the crystal."

"I am fine if I don't have the crystal. I do not need it or want it."

"But it needs you. We need you. You are the only one who can control this magic. If anyone else gets their hands on it, there will be endless wars, not only here but in your world, too. You have seen the battlefield on which we fought Keya's army. That place used to be full of life but now it is a wasteland. It will be like that everywhere if you do not exist."

"So what are you saying? I should trade your life to keep the entire world safe?"

"Yes."

"Tell me the truth, Loquis. Do you really want to die?"

"I want to live. But I do not want to do so if I have to sacrifice everyone else. It is my decision and I hope you will honor it."

I quickly got up and walked to the door. I needed to get out of there.

"Cassiea, you must come to terms with your destiny."

My hand went to my hair, to the feather. Preina. Destined. That was what Wolrik had said. Preina.

At the door, I turned to him.

"Who else knows of your visions of me?"

"Our lord is the only one."

I nodded and left.

Did I believe him? Should I believe him? Must I believe him? How could it be possible for one person to decide the fate of everybody else? I was a person who did not even want to make that choice. What was I going to do? These questions were still hovering in my mind the next day. It seemed a rumor had spread about what I could do with my magic. I could see their stares and hear their whispers. I could feel their hostilities exuding from them whenever I was around. Disconcerted and angry as I was at them for making me feel this way, I pushed it away, set fire to it, and did not let it bother me. They

did not know me. They only knew of what I represented. I could not let that make me feel alienated, helpless or weak. I would not let it happen. I would not let them intimidate me.

\*\*\*\*\*

Wolrik stood in front of their lord and the visor, his friend, Loquis. He had just finished relaying his side of what had happened on the mission to get the Sighyn Stone and how he had lost one of the books of blood magic when Keya's island was destroyed.

"Is that all, Wolrik?" the lord asked.

"Cass and I have used magic in front of several Tyrein. One in particular that I am concerned about is a man by the name of Gairen Merigold."

His lord nodded. "We will look into this and erase his memories if we have to."

"Yes, my lord."

"Is there anything else you would like us to know?" Loquis asked.

Wolrik hesitated before saying, "During the time Cass and I were in the castle, before the whole place collapsed..." He stopped, not wanting to speak further.

"What is it? If there are any concerns, we must know."

"She bent over in pain before a bright light appeared from her chest. It lasted only a couple of seconds. Afterward, she was able to use magic consistently and consciously. Before then, there was only one incident during our mission when she used magic. It was when she destroyed creatures of Keya's creation. It was done unconsciously during an intense emotion of fright and threat to her life. She was not even aware that the magic came from her."

"Then it is true. She does have Keya's magic," their lord said.

"That would be impossible. Cass would need to be by Keya's side in order to take her magic before she died."

"That is true, but we do not know too much about how Keya had obtained her magic from others," Loquis said. "As you know, using blood magic to kill a magical being to steal their magic only lasts for a couple of days. But Keya was able to hold onto it and the magic did not die with her as it was supposed to do. And now, Cass holds the magic. It is drawn to her." He held out a necklace with a crystal tied to it for them to see. "This is the crystal that I placed Keya's magic into when she died. As you can see, it is gone, as it was meant to do. It was not meant to transfer into Cass's crystal, a crystal identical to the one I have here. I know this to be true because I have met Cass after I returned and I could sense Keya's magic in her crystal."

"I do not believe she will harm us," Wolrik said in her defense.

"Be that as it may, we must be careful. If there is nothing else Wolrik, you may go," his lord said to him.

He nodded to them and walked away.

Once he was gone, Loquis turned to his lord. "Why did you not tell him about my vision of Cass?"

"The pareal is in flux every time I read him. His emotions are in conflict. It is not the time to let him know. We will wait until his mind is clear and rational."

"As a visor, I agree with you. But as a friend to Wolrik, I prefer he knew everything."

"I understand, Loquis. As you have visioned, Cass will be a danger to us all in the future. We must tread lightly."

\*\*\*\*\*

It was late in the evening when I returned to my cort and was surprised to see Wolrik waiting for me. Though I had not seen him since he left to help his lord, I had this suspicious feeling that he was in bed with me last night. Crazy as it sounded, I could smell his scent on my pillow and felt an impression of his arms around me. It might have been my imagination; a wishful thinking on my part, but I could have sworn I felt him. Even though I was still hurt by his betrayal, I was glad he was there. I could not

confirm any of it though because I was asleep, dreaming again of Master Xin and his training. This time the dream was more vivid, stronger, and real, and it lasted longer than usual.

Wolrik moved a few steps until we were an inch apart. His arm came up but he quickly placed it back down to rest at his side.

“Can we talk?”

I nodded. I knew we would have to face each other sooner or later, but I had hoped it would be later, when I went back to my timeline.

“I want to explain,” he said.

“There is nothing to explain. I can accept your marriage to Pixiena and your betrothal to Kydiea as long as it is over now. What I cannot accept is your secrecy. You should have told me the truth from the beginning. If you had cared about me as you said, you should have warned me about what I was getting myself into on that day when I was about to come here. You should have told me about your relationship with Pixiena and Kydiea. If you had told me from the beginning, I would not have this feeling of betrayal. I would be upset, but I would not have felt betrayed. I trusted you and now that is gone.”

“I couldn’t. I’m sorry, but I couldn’t.”

“Then can you promise me that you will not keep things from me again?”

His silence was my answer.

“I think we are done talking.” I moved around him to get to my door. Before I could open it, he grabbed my hand.

“Cass, there are certain things I cannot say and things that I must keep from you. But one thing that I would never lie to you about—is that I love you. I hope one day you will understand and forgive me.”

He let go and I could hear him moving away. I turned to see him leave and forced myself to stay still. After what he had done, I still wanted him back; I wanted to be with him but I could not do that. I could not take any more secrets and lies.

## Chapter 18

Loquis, their lord, and I gathered in the Runier the next day. I was relieved when they told me that I was going home, back to my timeline. After my encounter with Wolrik, I was unable to sleep at all that night. I had tossed and turned in bed and went out into the night for a swim, hoping a few laps in the lake would tire me out. But it did nothing. I was wide awake and had watched the sun breaking through the night sky. I couldn't stop thinking about him, what he had done, what I had said to him, and how I still wanted him back. It was still early in the morning when I had finally given up trying to sleep. I had finished dressing when there was a knock on the door. Loquis was there to tell me that it was time to send me back. I was tired and missed my apartment and I was more than happy to follow him. Though I had not asked, he told me that Wolrik was away on an assignment for their lord. I just nodded and stared straight ahead.

There was only the three of us: Loquis, who was able to see into the future, and their lord, who was able to see into the pareal, and me. Since there was no one with a level five that could see into the past, their lord warned me that there were no guarantees they would be able to send me back to the same day, time and place from where I had left. He did assure me that I would be back a week or two after I had left and I would be a mile or two away from where I had been.

Loquis and I had our hand on the opal and waited for their lord. He turned to me and said, "I wish you luck on your journey, Cass. I will see you at the end." With those cryptic words he placed his hand on the opal.

As before, I felt a slight jolt of electricity running through me before trees surrounded me. I did not know where I was and I started making an opening to my cort. Then I stopped myself. I had enough of the Elvains and made an opening to my apartment instead. The first thing I did was head to my bed and sleep. Night had fallen when I woke, dressed, and walked downstairs to the bar. There were very few customers and Xena was at her usual spot, behind the counter. When she saw me, she stopped what she was doing, filled a glass with some liquid that I didn't recognize and walked over to the other end of the bar where I was sitting.

"I did not order this," I said when she placed the drink next to me.

"On the house."

I swallowed it in one shot and refrained from coughing. It was whiskey. The best one she had in the house. She then poured me a glass of water. As casually as I could, I slowly sipped the water. I could still feel the burning fire from the whiskey down my throat.

"We were worried about you. Why didn't you tell anyone that you are back?"

"I needed some alone time and some sleep."

"The elders are expecting you."

"Tomorrow."

She was silent. I avoided looking at her, knowing that she was frowning at me because I didn't jump to my feet and run to meet the elders. I was still tired and hungry. Tomorrow would be soon enough. If they didn't like it, it wasn't my problem.

She went to the back, where the kitchen and her office were. In a couple of minutes, she came back with a bowl of vegetable soup and a corned beef sandwich and placed it in front of me.

"Eat. You look like you are at death's door. And when you are done, we can see about you passing your test."

Those frozen pieces of Keya's creatures popped into my mind when I saw the sandwich. I blanched and pushed it as far away from me as I could. I ignored Xena's frown when I only had the soup.

“You failed once again.”

“What do you mean I failed? I did exactly what I was supposed to do. I found the creature and brought it back to Edeon before the time was up and before the end of the line.”

“True. But you forgot to notice your surroundings.”

“I did. It was dark, no one was around and I trapped him before he could do any damage.”

“You forgot about the camera across the street. And the creature is a she.”

“What camera?”

“My point exactly. You did not look around first to make sure everything was clear. It is harder now with all this technology you have here, unlike the old days when all we had to worry about was people discovering what we were doing. Now there are cameras everywhere and everyone has a phone that can take pictures and videos and download to the web for the entire world to see.”

“Well, how would you have handled this situation?”

She sighed before saying, “First of all, I would make sure I know where the cameras are. When I spotted the creature, I would cast a spell to make him invisible to others—which will also work on electronics. Then I would lure her away from anyone that may be lurking around and last, I would quickly send her back.”

“Isn’t there a manual for this sort of thing?”

“Yes, it is called common sense and observing others when you are out hunting with them.”

“Okay, I get it. You don’t have to be so harsh about it. It is not as if I’ve done this all my life. I am still new at this.”

“It is because you are not taking this seriously. You do not care how important it is for us to be inconspicuous to your people.”

“Then why don’t you explain it to me. Why must you hide at all?”

“It is because all of you are not ready. Any slight change from the norm and you all freak out. Imagine if we reveal ourselves to you all and to know that we have been here, hiding for years. There will be mass hysteria. Never mind the fact that we can do magic, something most of your population can’t do. And one thing I have learned, as I lived among your people throughout the centuries, is that you all do not do well when you get scared, feel threatened, or feel vulnerable.”

“All right, all right, I get your point. But you must know, your people can’t stay hidden forever. Especially, as you mentioned before, there are cameras everywhere and everyone can snap pictures or take videos on their phones.”

“We are aware of this. That is why we have to be more cautious than ever. We better go. It is getting late and you have a meeting with the elders tomorrow.”

“Wait! What about the camera?”

“Luckily for you, I have already made us invisible to it before the start of the test.”

The next day I dragged my feet to meet with the elders. We met at the usual spot and the usual people were there. The five elders: Bortish, Grinfir, Huszic, Balkar, and Molera. And the others, Shuron, Mirra, Wolrik. There was one other person who was blocked by Wolrik. When he turned, Pix was revealed. I quickly walked over, ignoring everyone else.

“What are you doing here? You have some nerve showing your face after what you did. You may have erased his memories but not mine.”

She cringed away from me and moved slightly behind Wolrik. Her frightened and innocent expression did not deter me from my anger. I was surprised when Wolrik moved in front of her, protectively blocking her from me.

“Do not harm her, Cass.”

“Me harm her! You—all of you should be worried about her harming us. You may not remember since she erased your memories of her, but she is evil. She tried to kill me. She killed Norus.”

“Cassiea, she is not the person that you have met in the past,” Wolrik said.



“What are you talking about?”

“She is the daughter of Pixiena, whom you know of from the past.”

“What!” I moved to face her. “What sort of trick are you playing?” She cringed again and it just got me angrier. It didn’t help that Wolrik moved in front of her again, protecting her from me.

Mirra came forward and placed an arm around Pix. She turned and started to cry on her shoulder. I turned my back on them, trying to calm myself down. I could not believe after all she had put me through, they were comforting her and I was the bad guy.

“Please, let us explain, Cassiea,” Mirra said.

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. I turned around and faced them with my arms crossed over my chest, radiating anger and impatience.

“Pixiena was her mother. Pixi was unfortunate to inherit her mother’s likeness and name. We at first did not believe her, but we have looked into it. Pixiena did have a daughter and her father’s name was Uindaron from the clan MiTork. He died in the clan war. Her mother had kept her locked up, hidden away. It was only after her death during the war with Keya that she was revealed to us,” Shuron explained.

“I can confirm her mother’s death. I was there to see her body and I also found Pixi in the cell where she had lived most of her life,” Wolrik said.

“We are sorry about the way you found out. We did not plan this meeting between you and Pixi very well,” Mirra said.

“You believe this? Do you know that she is able to erase people’s minds and plant new ones? How do you know she hasn’t planted this nonsense on all of you? I know she could do this because she tried to erase my memories. But somehow, I don’t know why, it didn’t work. I remembered everything. She did it to Wolrik.” I turned to him before saying, “Remember when you came back to the cave? You found me sitting on the ground, leaning on the wall, unconscious. That was not really how you found me when you came back. What really happened was you saw me next to Pix. She was lying on the ground unconscious. I had put her to sleep because she tried to kill me. Norus was dead. She had killed him to gain more magic. She told me, before you returned, that she was going to kill me, then erase your memories of her and plant new one so that the two of you can start over.”

“Pixiena is gone, Cass, believe me. I remember our time in the cave. She was unsuccessful with erasing my memories too. I do remember coming in to find you sitting next to Pixiena as you described and everything else afterward. I remember waking up and seeing you sitting on the ground, leaning on the wall, and she was gone.”

“If what you say is true, how is it possible for her daughter to look exactly like her mother? I mean, I did not know her and only met her for a short period but I would never forget her face, not after what she tried to do.”

“I know it is hard, it was hard for us at first but you will see in time, after you get to know her better. She is not like her mother.”

“Please,” Pixi said behind Wolrik. Her body was plastered to his back and she had a nervous hold on his arm. “Please give me a chance. I promise that I will make it up to you. You will see I am nothing like my mother.”

I still didn’t believe her but I said nothing. There was nothing to say since all of them were on her side and trusted her. If I should protest further, they would think that I was being difficult and they still wouldn’t believe me.

“Please, Cassiea,” Pix begged me again, “Please believe me. I want us to be friends.”

“Her mother’s sin is not hers to bear, Cassiea,” Mirra said to me. “You must let it go.”

“Let us not talk about this any further. We had centuries to get to know Pixi and to absolve our misguided distrust in her,” Shuron said to them. Then he turned to me. “It is selfish of us to have you come here so soon after your journey back. We will understand if you want to postpone this meeting for another day.”

I was grateful to him for giving me an opening to leave. But the thought of coming back here again tomorrow, or a week or a month from now, I could not do it. Not after her.

“I am fine. Let’s get this over with.”

The meeting dragged on for hours and I was exhausted when I came back. I went down to the bar in need of a drink. Xena had thought so too. She placed a drink in front of me even before I sat down. I gulped it down, letting the fire run down my throat and into my stomach. It warmed me and relaxed me a little. I motioned for another one. The bottle was already in her hand and she poured it all the way to the top. I swallowed it down. Numbness settled in. I motioned for another one and she obliged.

“This is the last one, Cassiea,” she said when I requested a fourth shot.

“It is ‘Cass.’ Why can’t you call me that? Is it so hard to say?”

She looked at me as if I had gone mad. “Cassiea is your name. Why do you want me to call you something else?”

“Because Cassiea sounds like an old ancient lady. Do I look old to you?”

“I know I will be if we keep talking about this,” she said under her breath.

I heard her and chose to ignore it.

“Cassiea is a beautiful name. Why change it?”

“I’m not changing it. I just shortened it.”

“It has been changed. You should be proud of the name that was given to you, not hide it.”

“I’m not hiding anything. And besides, you should take your own advice. You call yourself Xena, not Tirenna.”

“I and everyone else who stays here, in your world, for long periods of time do so to hide who we are. We feel we would blend in more easily if we used common names from your world to waylay any questions or suspicions.”

“And you thought Xena would help blend in better?”

She ignored me and went on.

“Your name symbolizes who you are—your identity.”

My mouth turned into a frown. All of my pent-up emotions deflated. Then I pouted. I still liked to be called Cass. Sometimes you need to change your name when the person you were before was no longer the person you were now. A form of metamorphosis, like a caterpillar changing into a butterfly. Or maybe she was right. Maybe I had something against my name. The person behind that name, I always hated her and wanted to be someone else. Someone stronger. Someone who was not afraid. Someone who could stand on her own.

“Tell me what is really bothering you.”

“That is what’s bothering me.”

“I know you better. Spill it,” Xena said.

“You should have told me that you have met me in your past.”

“I couldn’t. It was not my place to tell you these things.”

“Then whose is it? It is my life you are talking about. I have the right to know what is going on and not be kept in the dark.”

“You know everything you needed to know.”

“It is not yours or anyone else’s right to choose that for me.”

She sighed and leaning one arm on the counter, putting her face close to mine. “We can debate this all day long. And neither of us will convince the other that they are right. All I can say is that we do things the way we do for a good reason. It is the visor’s responsibility to let the elders and our lord know about their visions. And it is the elder’s and our lord’s decision on how to handle these visions. It is never wise to know too much about the future. We Elvains know that it causes more trouble than they are worth. It is also true about going into the past. You need to trust us.”

“How can I trust you guys if you keep secrets from me?”

She was quiet for a while before she moved and started cleaning up the work area.

“You know, he would have been a great leader,” she said.

“Who?”

“Wolrik. I don’t know if you knew but he was supposed to succeed Zoryar, Shuron’s father, for the leadership.”

“Yes, I know.”

“He didn’t take the job because of you. Did you know that?”

When I didn’t answer, she went on. “Shuron is a great leader too but at the time, after the war with Keya, it was Wolrik whom we chose. He declined the position even after our insistence. He chose instead to come here. He wanted to work here and get to know the Tyreinians better. He became the leader of the KinMin clan who are stationed here.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

Ignoring my question, she went on.

“When I met you centuries ago, I could tell that the two of you cared for one another. I am not sure what happened in the end, but he was different afterward. I have never seen him with another woman after you left. Sure, there were a couple of females over the centuries but it never amounted to anything. My guess it is because of you.”

“What about his marriage to Pixiena or his betrothal to Kydiea?”

“His marriage to Pixiena never really happened. Pixiena had placed that memory into him and also the feelings of love into him, by Keya’s command. Keya was hoping that their union would force Wolrik to side with her and betray us.”

“What happened; why didn’t it work?”

“It did work. We thought we had lost him until after a mission, ordered by Keya, to retrieve something from Lord Arlington of Clayford’s estate. Somehow, Pixiena’s spell over him broke but he stayed in character until we called him back. When you went back to the past, it was about three months after he finished spying on Keya.”

“And Kydiea?”

“After the clan war and before the war with Keya, Wolrik’s father was the lord to the MilTork clan. Wolrik was sent to the AulTar clan to be an apprentice to Zoryar and to succeed him temporarily until Shuron was old enough to take over. But during the war with Keya, Wolrik’s father, Suniray, was wounded and dying. Wolrik was already deep under cover as one of Keya’s men and it would not have been wise to take him out in order to take over his father’s position. There were very few of his clansmen left by that time. And so, it was agreed before Suniray’s death that the MilTork and the AulTar clans would unite into one. Wolrik would become the next lord and they would keep AulTar’s clan’s name. And by our law, he must marry one of AulTar’s clanswoman to seal the deal.”

“Wait, as far as I know, all of you have only one lord and five clans.”

“After the war with Keya, there were so few of us left. We may live longer than you humans but it is hard for us to bear children and increase our numbers. All of the lords except for Zoryar were killed by one of Keya’s Gurats. They were the creatures that you fought when helping our wounded on the battlefield. The clans agreed to unite together as one with the exception of the TezMir clan. And as an honor to our old ways, we kept our clan’s name when we were out in one of our campsites in order to keep track of where each of us were. The elders were assigned to each of the clans in order to inform all the clan’s leaders about what was going on when we were away from our home. Since Wolrik was already preparing to become a leader and was betrothed to Kydiea, we all decided that he would be the next lord to us all after Zoryar stepped down. None of us were too happy when Wolrik stubbornly declined the position. Kydiea, who was Zoryar’s sister, was not thrilled with the idea of marrying him because she was already in love with someone else. But she had agreed to this for the good of our people. She was not as upset as the rest of us were when Wolrik stepped down. Zoryar stayed longer as our leader than was intended in order to prepare Shuron for the job.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Because you need to know.”

“Oh, no secrets now?”

She ignored me and went on. “I think he has suffered enough, Cassiea. I can understand why you felt betrayed by him, but now that you know the whole story, I think you should forgive him.”

With those words, she went over to the other side of the bar to attend to her customers. I got up and headed upstairs. I didn't think I could do it, I thought to myself. I didn't think I would be able to forgive him. There were too many secrets and lies. What guarantees did I have that he would not keep things from me again?

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“Greetings, Tirena”

She turned and nodded.

“My lord,” she said.

Shuron nodded back and tilted his head slightly to look up in contemplation at Cassiea's apartment that was above them.

“She just went upstairs and just in case you are wondering, she's none too happy.”

“Our meeting with the elders did not go as well as I had hoped.”

“You don't need to tell me that. It was written all over her face when she came back.”

“How is she, Tirena?”

“Not good. What exactly happened in the meeting?”

He turned to face her. “You know I cannot divulge any information.”

“Well whatever it was, she didn't like it.”

They were silent for a while. Once in a while, he would glance up at the ceiling. “I sense your disapproval. I would like to know what it is.”

She sat a glass down that she was wiping dry and leaned her arm on the counter. “You need to tell her the truth. Not the whole truth but the ones that would involve her. She is not like us. Just because we have adopted her into our home does not automatically make her understand who we are and how we work.”

“You know as well as I do that it is dangerous. They are like children, never knowing what they will do or how they will react from one minute to the next.”

“That is only because they do not live as long as we do. And that is the only reason we are more cautious and responsible. You need to trust her to do the right thing.”

“I would like to, but her performance since the first time she came to us has not been well received. As your lord, I must protect us as a whole first.”

“Look. You know as well as I do that most of us were not too thrilled when you and the elders decided to let her hold on to Keya's magic. I thought it was insane. But we trusted you and we trusted Loquis. You had placed me here to look after her and to make sure she is kept in line. And I am telling you, from my observation of her during these past years, she needs to know the truth. She is more acceptable to us if we do not hide things from her.”

“I will give it some thought.”

“You do that.”

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I was tired and hungry, and the fridge was empty. Only a bag of chips was left in the cupboard. I grabbed it and stood there eating when I noticed the fish tank. I walked over and bent down to watch the goldfish swimming around. I had forgotten about the fish and was glad Xena had remembered to take care of it. A chip was halfway into my mouth when I realized that I never told her about the fish and she would never have come into my apartment without asking me first. I quickly straightened when a movement caught my eyes through the murky distorted glass and water of the fish tank. It was

Shuron, standing in the middle of the room.

I took a bite of my chip and pointed the open bag towards him.

“Sorry. All I can offer you are these chips. I didn’t have time to go grocery shopping.”

“That is quite all right.”

I took another bite and walked over to the couch before setting the rest of the bag down. He walked over to the window and stared out into the night. “I am sorry,” he said with his back to me.

“What?” I was eyeing my chips and wasn’t sure if I heard him correctly.

He turned around. “I am sorry, Cassiea. Tirena has advised me to tell you everything that we have been keeping from you. I too have thought of this from the moment you came to us a year ago. Back then, my father was our lord and he had ordered us not to reveal anything to you. I did not understand his reasoning, but after taking over his position as Lord to the Elvain, I agree with him. It is a decision that the elders and I did not make lightly. You have to understand we are still unsure of you and hope you will have the patience and faith in us that we will do you no harm.”

I didn’t know which part shocked me more. Xena asking Shuron not to keep secrets from me or Shuron admitting he was keeping secrets and would continue to do so and I just had to deal with it.

“What if I don’t want to? What if I need those secrets in order to make better decisions? I would have still helped you if I had known I was the one to go back into the past instead of you. If you had told me, I would have been better prepared.”

“That decision was not mine to make. It was my father’s last wish before he stepped down. Mirra, Wolrik and I were forbidden to tell you the truth.”

“Why?”

“I do not know. When the time came, Wolrik and I had asked my father to reconsider. All he would say was he had faith in you.”

“I’m honored that he believes in me but it still doesn’t explain why he wanted to keep it a secret. I still think it would have been better if I knew what I was getting into.”

“I am sorry that it was kept from you. I am also sorry I cannot tell you everything you want to know. Although I prefer you to stay with us, I will understand if you decide not to have any involvement with us because of our secrets. My only request is to wait until you are more proficient in controlling your magic before you leave. And it goes without saying, you will always have a home with us should you need a place to stay.”

I looked away not wanting to meet his eyes. A sense of relief and fear swarmed inside me. A year ago, he had given me the same option of being part of their lives or to cut all ties with them. Now, he had offered me the same choice again. Back then, I had felt relieved by his words, to know that I was not a prisoner here. Mirra had told me once that I would one day be a threat to them. And even though I made them nervous, they were willing to let me go. But I had decided to stay because I had wanted to ease their fears and worries about me.

Back then, I had also felt frightened by his words. If I had left, I would have been alone in the world. I would not have known where to go or how to survive. I had needed them as much as they had needed me. That was another reason why I had stayed. Now, with everything that had happened, should I still stay?

“Cassiea.”

I turned to him when he called my name.

“I must go. Please think about all that I have said.”

He nodded and walked to the door. He stood there, with his back to me for a few moments before turning around.

“Wolrik—he loves you. I sense this each time the two of you are together. I hope you will keep that in mind the next time you meet him. All of us have done things we are not proud of. Wolrik, for the sake of us all, has lost more than he should.”

And with that, he left.

I went out through the fire escape to get something to eat and I decided to use the main entrance to return. I quickly went past the bar, avoiding eye contact with Xena, then through the kitchen and up the stairs. I came to a halt when I saw Wolrik waiting at the top of the landing. He had a look of uncertainty and apprehension on his face. I looked away and hesitated only a second before I slowly walked up the stairs and past him. I opened the door and stood there, one foot in the apartment and one foot out in the hallway, facing him.

“What are you doing here? Shouldn’t you be comforting Pix right now after the scare I gave her?”

“Cass...” He said my name in a long, drawn-out sigh and started rubbing the back of his neck.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to be...sorry.”

“I came...” He stopped and let out a long breath before saying, “Maybe I should come back another time.” He turned and started to walk away.

I stood there watching him go. This time there was another reason for my relief and fear if I chose to leave. I was relieved that I wouldn’t have to face Wolrik again and be tempted to fall in love with him. Even with that said, I feared never seeing him again. I did want him back but I was afraid of getting hurt again. Could I make this work even with all his secrecy? Could I take the risk? Call me a fool but even with what he had done, his betrayal and secrets, I still believed in him. I still wanted him and never wanted to let him go. I moved and grabbed hold of his hand. He held on tightly and I could see the hope in his eyes.

“Stay.” I said to him. Stay.