

Freedom Fight Trilogy Book One

# THE KEY OF F

When the key  
you thought  
was your  
destiny unlocks  
the gateway to  
magic...

Jennifer Haskin

THE KEY OF F

Freedom Fight Trilogy Book One

BY JENNIFER HASKIN

[Haskin.author@gmail.com](mailto:Haskin.author@gmail.com)

**DEDICATED:**

*to Terri Hovey~*

*I miss you so much.*

*You are the one who inspires me,*

*because you were the one*

*who believed I could do this.*

*I love you.*



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

Copyright © 2018 by Haskin Originals

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or used in any manner without written permission of the copyright owner except for the use of quotations in a book review. For more information, address: [Haskin.author@gmail.com](mailto:Haskin.author@gmail.com)

Cover art by Derek Murphy

Map by GV-ART

ISBN 13- 978-1-79813-147-3 (paperback)

ISBN 10- 978-1-62420-436-4 (ebook)

[www.JenniferHaskin.com](http://www.JenniferHaskin.com)

## FREEDOM FIGHT TRILOGY

Book One: *The Key of F* (2018)

[www.amazon.com/dp/B07XWVSH2B](http://www.amazon.com/dp/B07XWVSH2B)

\*Official Book Trailer: [www.youtube.com/watch?](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P4hGpwX3Xng)

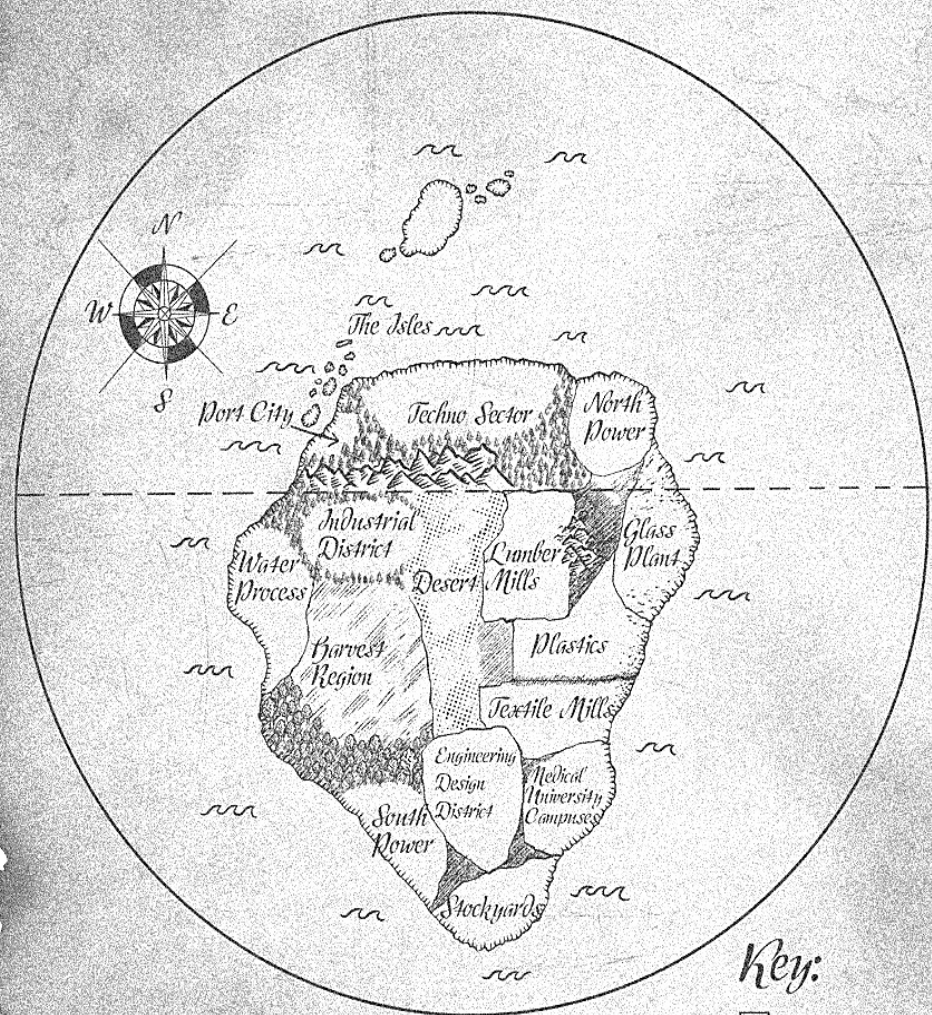
[v=P4hGpwX3Xng](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P4hGpwX3Xng)

Book Two: *The Queen's Heart* (2019)

[www.amazon.com/dp/B07XWTH6ZB](http://www.amazon.com/dp/B07XWTH6ZB)

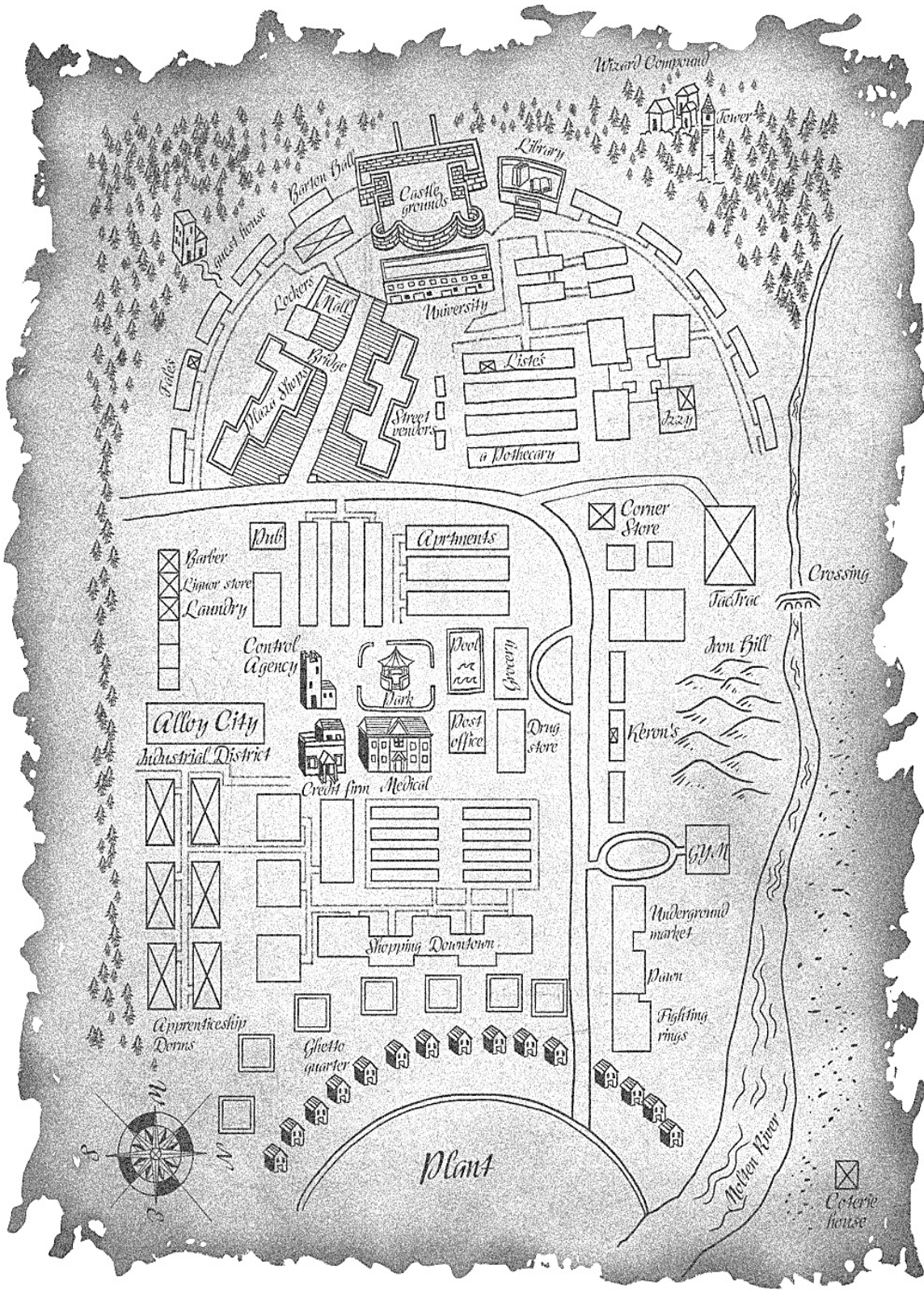
Book Three: (Coming in 2020) *The Final Rescue*

# Map of Algea



## Key:

-  Forest
-  Fruit trees
-  Grassy plains
-  Sand



Wizard Compound

Tower

Library

Castle grounds

University

Barton Hall

Lochors

Bridge

Maze Shops

Street vendors

Listes

a Apothecary

Jazz

Guest house

Trades

Crossing

Tachric

Inn Hill

Heron's

Gym

Underground market

Dance

Fighting rings

Cottor house

Plan

Alloy City

Industrial District

Credit firm

Medical

Shopping Downtown

Ghetto quarter

Apprenticeship Dorms



## CHAPTER 1

“Hurry! You have to jump!” Izzy cupped her hands around her mouth.

Terror enveloped Fale. Her heartbeat was so fast; it felt like there was a bird trying to take flight inside her chest. Imaginary wings beat against her lungs and she struggled to fill them.

*Maybe this isn't such a good idea.*

The noise of the people around her faded as if she were behind a glass wall. It dimmed the vision of bodies swaying in her periphery; yet heightened her sense of touch as she felt the air between her fingers. She rubbed her slick palms down the front of her suit. Backing up slowly, she felt the way with her feet. She had spent the entire season riddled with anxiety in anticipation of this moment.

“Come on, Fale, it'll be fine! Trust me.” Izzy waved her hands above her head.

*I'm too high.*

Suddenly, the board Fale was standing on began to bounce. She looked down at all the people, so far away. She hated this. Immediately she bent her knees and threw her hands out for balance. Before she could turn around, a body crashed into her. Wrapping their limbs around her, pinning her arms to her body, the attacker fell with her. Fale barely had time to shriek as she hit the surface hard, and her mouth filled with water. She pulled out of the embrace and pushed her assailant away, kicking with all her might.

As she rose to the top and sputtered, she looked around to find her best friend in the world, also surfacing. “Lisle, you pushed me!”

Lisle dunked his head back in the water and laughed like a hyena. “I wish I could have



seen your face!”

“Ugh.” She splashed water at him.

“You were never going to jump on your own. Admit it,” he challenged her.

“I would have. You wait, when you’re not looking, you’re going to get it.” Her smile was genuine. “Let’s go back to the shallow end.”

“I knew you could do it,” Izzy said when they got back to their little corner of the public pool.

“I didn’t do it. Lisle did,” Fale said while pushing Lisle’s arm away from her.

“Whatever,” Izzy said. “You still jumped off the highest diving board we have. I’m proud of you.”

The pool was crowded during this time of year. The Industrial District was one of the hottest cities in Algea, due to all the metal, and the water was the only way some of the less fortunate had to cool down. Fale felt a spark of indignation over the fact that the most unfortunate people were the only ones not allowed. Income-based privileges were common here, but she didn’t have to like it. A poor citizen must be the guest of a wealthy one to be seen at the pool.

“Thanks, Iz. Who wants to dry off in the sun?”

“I’m game,” Izzy turned toward the ladder.

“I’m starving.” Lisle followed the girls out of the pool and over to the wooden slatted lounge chairs.

“You’re always hungry,” Izzy said. “Where are you putting it all?”

Lisle laughed. “I’m a growing boy. Do you want anything from the snack bar?”

The girls both shook their heads and Lisle left them, rubbing his hair into spikes with his

towel.

“So, are you *finally* ready for school to start? You are taking this whole thing too seriously if you ask me.” Izzy laid back and rubbed sun cream into her copper- colored skin. Fale admired Izzy’s petite features and smiled warmly when she met her chocolate- eyed gaze.

“Of *course* I’m not ready, I still have to buy textbooks for Educator Disciplines. Then I want to map out the University buildings, so I know where all my classes are. You’re welcome to come with me and walk the campus. I don’t understand how you can be so relaxed about it. Hey, can I use some of your sunscreen?”

“Sure. You know I make things up as I go. I won’t be ready until the day before it starts. I am ready for fall, though. This is the hottest summer Algea’s had in forever.” Izzy fanned herself and drank from an insulated cup.

“Didn’t you hear?” Fale looked at Izzy with her head cocked to the side. “Our planet is closer to the sun this year.”

“What? Why?”

“It’s because of some asteroid hitting us and throwing the planet’s orbit off, or something like it.” Fale didn’t understand much about space, scientists had long desired to visit the planet’s moon, but they had yet to do it.

“You’re making it up.” Izzy laughed.

“Probably isn’t true anyway. I read it while I was in line at the grocery,” Fale agreed. She spread the lotion on her chest, lifting the key from around her neck.

“I’ve given you so many pretty necklaces, and yet you insist on wearing that old thing.” Izzy pointed to the brown cord. “You could at least take it off for special occasions.”

“It was the last thing he gave me. I can’t take it off,” Fale said. “No occasion is important enough for me. Maybe I’m just too sentimental.”

“Nah, I get it. Your dad was special and it was his. Oh, look, Lisle’s back. And he brought food!” Izzy was delighted. “What’d you bring me, Lisle?”

“Veggie chips. What did I miss?”

“Izzy was asking me if I was ready for classes to start. What about you, Lisle? Did you convince your parents to back off?” Fale took the bag of chips he was offering.

“They are as pushy as ever. They’re making me take classes in natural science, and keep my wizard training part-time, or they won’t pay for any of it,” Lisle said.

“I hope you can do everything.” Fale munched on a chip.

“Are you still thinking about this wizard stuff? Everybody knows it’s not real, Lisle, just illusions. There’s no such thing as magic.” Izzy squinted up at him in the bright sunlight.

Lisle sighed. “It is real, Iz. I’ve seen amazing things.”

“Like what?” Fale asked.

Lisle pinched his lips together and narrowed his eyes in thought. Izzy laughed.

“He can’t think of anything,” she said. “My point, exactly.”

“There is more to it, but nothing’s coming to me right now.”

“I believe you, Lisle,” Fale said. “When will you be able to live with them? Or do you still have to keep your brother’s old apartment?”

“I have to stay in the city while I’m in school, then I’ll move out to the wizards’ congregate after graduation.”

“Well maybe you can work your magic on *my* parents,” Izzy said. “They pulled some strings at work to get me a job in the Control Agency. Can you imagine me as an office professional? The last thing I need is to work with my parents. I want to get out of this city and move somewhere more progressive. Maybe the Glass Plant. I’ve heard their art and culture there

is high class.”

Fale didn't understand those feelings. She was happy in the Industrial District. It might be a little rough around the edges, but she had everything she needed there. She was going to finish school in four years, then teach classes at the Takanori Core Training Center full time, helping with the books whenever she could. And by then, she should have mastered the craft of control, and she would become a full Takanori warrior. For now, though, she was going to enjoy her last childhood summer. When classes began, life would settle down, and she would focus on her goals.

“Don't look now, but someone is staring at you,” Izzy poked Fale's arm.

“Who?” Fale sat up and looked around.

Izzy groaned. “I said *don't* look. It's you-know-who.”

“Keron's here?” Fale tried to keep the excitement out of her voice as she scanned the crowd, but there was no fooling her friend.

Izzy nodded to the chairs by the entrance. “And he's with a girl I don't know.” Izzy was a social bee, buzzing with news. It always troubled her not to know someone. Especially someone who looked like *that* in an expensive looking three-piece swimsuit. Fale noticed no one sat too near them, though. Most fantocci avoided the stares and put-downs that came along with public places, but Keron had never been like the rest of the biomechanical population. He seemed to find a new wealthy benefactress every month, who insisted on showing him off. Or they were just trying to prove their benevolent belief in equality to their friends.

“Oh.” Fale flopped back onto her lounge chair. The girl was looking at a paperback, her red suit crossing her chest, then connected to a center piece with gold chains, linking to some very small bottoms. Fale grimaced at her blonde hair piled high and crystallized glasses. She could never compete with that. What was she thinking? It's not like he hadn't already turned her down flat and humiliated her, but only Izzy knew (because she'd told Fale not to ask him). Fale



had thought at the time Izzy might have been the tiniest bit jealous, seeing as how she'd been friends with Keron longer, but maybe Izzy had just meant to warn her. She glanced over to see him looking right at her with his horribly adorable smirk. She quickly looked away. "Why did you have to ruin a perfectly good afternoon?" she asked Izzy.

"I said he was staring at *you*, dummy," she answered.

Suddenly, Lisle was paying attention. "Who's staring at Fale?"

"No one," Fale said sourly.

"Keron," Izzy volunteered.

"Oh," Lisle sounded as defeated as Fale had.

"What's wrong with you two? I'm going to go say hi." Izzy leaned forward.

"No. No, Izzy. Come back here. Oh, please don't--"

Izzy walked across the scorching cement to Keron. The Control agent stationed at the gate watched her closely. Keron leaned back and crossed his ankles in front of him, his metal leg shining in the sun. Izzy spoke to them, and Fale wished she could hear what was being said. The other girl pulled down her sunglasses to look up at Izzy, and of course, Izzy pointed over to Fale and Lisle. Fale wanted to shrink and hide, but she forced herself to wave. Keron chuckled.

*What does the chuckle mean?*

Izzy said a few more words and turned to come back. Fale watched the girl whisper to Keron, and he roared with laughter. That was it, Fale was ready to go. Keron got up and lightly kissed the girl's upturned face and walked to the men's room.

"Izzy, I'm going to kill you one of these days," Fale said.

"Nah, you love me too much."

"Things change," Lisle said.

“So, do you want the details, or not?” Izzy taunted.

“Not,” Fale looked down at her faded old one-piece suit. “I simply want to live my own life and never think of him again.”

## CHAPTER 2- NINE MONTHS LATER

*Blood dripped from Fale's sword onto the metal decoration of her boots. She watched it trickle down to join the puddle she stood in. Heaving a great breath, she squinted into the morning fog, trying to catch a glimpse of a flag in crimson and gold. Her colors; if she had won, the castle would be flying her colors. A man in battered armor ran toward her and instinctively she raised her weapon. Mud and gore covered him. Where were his colors? She couldn't tell which side he was on, but he was nearly to her. If he had a hidden weapon...*

*"Who are you?" she shouted, but he didn't answer. He bore down on her with surprising swiftness. He reached her and without hesitation, she drove her blade through the gap in armor at his waist.*

*"Milady," he gasped in surprise, eyes bright with tears. She noticed how young his freckled face appeared as he opened and closed his mouth, like a fish lying in a boat. "I came to tell you," he whispered and swallowed before closing his eyes. "We won." His limp body collapsed to the ground.*

~\*~

It wasn't the moon's coming red-sky eclipse that drove Fale so quickly inside; it wasn't even the spring chill. She had dreamt of a war; one beyond her lifetime, yet she'd been there. She had led the army. Killing the boy in the dream troubled her. Today she wanted to be around people she knew and trusted. She *thought* her city was safe. Still, tingles ran the length of her arms, warning her of something sinister waiting. She shook her limbs to ward off the tremors of edgy nerves and pushed through the glass door of the pub. Immediately she felt the thump of a low and steady bass guitar, as a musical lament rang through the smoky antechamber. A torrid blast of heat hit Fale in the face as she entered the main room of the pub during its lunchtime press. *This place is like a sauna*, she thought as she scanned the room looking for her party. Her friends were hard to find in the boisterous crowd. She sidled down the bar to the back booths and

found them, waving and calling her name over the noise.

“Fale!” Izzy twisted in her seat. “Hurry up; lunch is almost over.”

Fale smiled brightly at Izzy, and ignored Keron as he stepped out of the booth for her to slide in. The seats, once a vibrant red leather, were now dull and cracked with wear.

“Sorry I’m late, Izzy.” They hugged briefly. “How were your morning classes?” she shouted above the noise of the deafening table next to them.

“Brutal.” Izzy rolled her eyes. “It’s crazy in here today. You should be glad you’re late; the guys have been arguing the whole time. Keron had a bad morning, and now he’s just plain pissy. It’s so loud and hot; I’m almost glad to go back to class,” she said, not caring if the guys heard her.

Fale shook her head, laughing. “Liar. Not even I am so sadistic. Don’t you have Industrial Instrumentations this afternoon? Nobody likes that class.”

“Not all of us had the benefit of an advisor like you did,” Izzy pouted. “Having a drink?” She lifted her glass half full of amber liquid.

Fale turned to her other side. “Keron, would you pass the pitcher?”

He looked at her tiredly and set his icy drink down. “Got a glass?” he asked.

“I guess I forgot to grab one from the bar on my way over,” she said, rising.

Keron sighed. “I’ll getcha one,” he grumbled, pushing her arm back into the seat.

*Odd; he really must be having a bad day.*

Keron rose as fluidly as a swimmer moving through a pool, despite having a mechanical arm and leg, but he didn’t get far. The booth next to them, a round booth, was packed full to overflowing with a group who called themselves the Rowdies. Trouble was their companion, and Fale had heard, mostly from her friends, they participated in underground fighting which was as



deadly as it was illegal. Most people gave them a wide berth. That day they felt the need to harass Keron. It wasn't unusual for fantocci, bondsmen marked by their metal limbs, to be the object of ridicule. They were glorified servants who had needed a limb or an organ replaced with metal parts and were now locked into lifelong service to pay their debt. Keron was passing their table, going to the side bar, when the leader taunted, "Hey metal man! Are you half metal everywhere? What about where it counts? Betcha can't please the women, eh?" The other Rowdies laughed as one of them grabbed a handful of his pants at the crotch.

Keron growled down at them, "Mind your own damn business." His hands curled into fists.

The Head Rowdy, dressed in black leather, jumped up to stand nose to nose with Keron and said, "I'm making it my business."

Other Rowdies stood, cocking their heads in interest, shifting their weight from foot to foot like skittish wild animals. Fale felt a familiar tingling down her arms and body. This time, pictures flashed through her mind. Vivid scenes of blood and danger, telling a story, played in her head and she knew what she needed to do. Instinctively, she snatched Keron's mallet and knife from their place on top of his toolbox and hid them under her bag. Fale looked around to make sure no one had noticed her acting strangely. An uneasy feeling made her reach back to put his tools where she'd found them, but she froze. Her vision had shown her this was the right decision. She covered them with her bag and watched, no matter how painful it would be to sit there and do nothing, to see if this would work itself out.

The Rowdy threw his first punch. Keron deflected but was momentarily dazed when he looked back and couldn't find his mallet or knife to use as weapons. Keron held his fists up to fight back; he swung at the head Rowdy and connected with his jaw. They wove around each other in a fighter's dance, each looking for the best blow. One of the Rowdies had slipped behind Keron wielding the hooked end of a pry bar and tripped his metal leg. As he fell, the head

Rowdy threw his next jab. Keron's head hit the table, and his eyes rolled briefly. Keron fell heavily to the floor, and the head Rowdy moved to kick him, but Keron rolled and punched the side of his knee cap. The Rowdy screamed. Keron was on his feet in seconds and glanced back at the seat for his weapons, but Fale kept them hidden. With every punch, Fale felt a twinge of pain. The fight was elevating. She had to stop this before someone called Control. No one else would dare help a fantocci in trouble, but she hated to imagine what fate might befall a fantocci caught fighting in public. There would be no mercy for him.

"Fale, do something." Izzy pushed against her.

Fale slid from the bench seat and jumped in between the men with her arms raised. She turned to Keron, watching his chest rise and fall as he glared above her head at his opponent.

"Leave it," she pleaded, attempting to push back Keron's arm with his fist held high. "He's not worth it." Bar patrons gathered to view the spectacle, and the bouncer was shoving his way toward them holding a baton.

"Please," she whispered.

Keron narrowed his eyes in a silent threat to the Rowdy but lowered his arm. The other Rowdies stood back with their leader expectantly, and Fale caught a glimpse of pointed metal slip back into more than one of their pockets. Fale exhaled in relief at the confirmation that she had just saved Keron's life.

Izzy took care of the bill, while their friends at the table ushered Keron outside, and Fale slipped his knife and mallet back into his toolbox. Fale made her farewells and accepted Izzy's leftover sandwich.

She ate as she walked toward Barton Hall by herself. As she passed the Mall, an oversized set of stairs where the University populace congregated, she walked through a glass-encased bridge and looked down at the people. Thoughts assailed her about how all day she had been tingling, like her feet had gone to sleep, but with notions, feelings? No, visions. Suddenly she

had known what to do before doing it. Worry crept along her mind like parasites looking for synapses, because everything had now changed.

These visions had been happening off and on for the last few months since she turned eighteen. Today was the first day she had acted *before* the vision came to pass, by taking Keron's tools, and changing its outcome. Her vision had been of Keron grabbing his weapons, passing up the leader by himself and jumping into the group of Rowdies, then being savagely beaten and stabbed. With his weapons, Keron was a reckless and formidable foe. With his weapons, he felt invincible. He would have gladly taken on the whole gang of Rowdies by himself and been killed. But it didn't happen; she had cheated death.

Was there a consequence for stealing a life? She was glad she saved him. If she knew what her visions meant, could she change the future? She would have to find Nelson, her guardian, and ask him what he thought after getting her new apartment. Maybe her friend, Lisle, had some ideas, too. She would talk to them both when she had her new place. She previously had a vision of her new lease of apartment A505 today. She was confident the move would go as smoothly as it had in the vision.

~\*~

Fale worried her dusty pink peasant shirt with teal stitching, over teal denim wouldn't be appropriate as she opened the door to Applegate Apartments. She wiped her brown suede boots on the mat and tried to calm her coffee colored hair to look presentable. The proprietress looked Fale up and down carefully, her lips pursed as she asked, "May I help you?"

"I'm here to rent an apartment." Fale regained her confidence and walked up to the desk. The woman wore a smart suit in hot pink wool with black trim. So much pink made Fale sick to her stomach; it reminded her of a chalky medicine from the apothecary.

"One bedroom or two?" The woman clicked her hot pink lacquered nails on the walnut varnished desk next to the huge white book she scribbled in.

“One, please.”

“Have a seat.” She flipped steel gray hair over her shoulder, then typed for what seemed like five minutes into a computation device. Computers weren’t common where Fale lived. They were made in the Techno Sector; this had to be an upscale apartment complex for the Industrial District. As children, all citizens were taught the country of Algea had erupted into civil war hundreds of years ago, and divided into sections centered on the production of certain needs. Then, those products were shipped to wherever they were required. Engineering Design made plans for the Industrial District, who made vehicles used to ship Harvest Region’s food to each city on the continent. If you were lucky enough to live close to Harvest, you ate fresh food; otherwise, it came dehydrated or frozen. The country worked like a well-oiled machine. Each city had its own medical and law enforcement group, but the Medical University Campuses were a city to themselves, training staff to go all over the country. If the system began to break down or cities had issues with one another, that’s when the country’s Takanori warriors were called to unite and keep the peace.

The woman, Mrs. Paramor, her nameplate said, finished her work and looked up. “I’m giving you apartment Q023.”

Fale stared at her. Dazed, she wondered if she’d heard her right. The visions had always come to pass exactly the way she’d seen them. What was happening? Were her visions betraying her? Could it be her fault for changing the last series of events? She forced herself to focus. “Are you sure? Isn’t A505 available?”

Mrs. Paramor turned up her contoured nose. “I booked it over the phone right before you got here. As if it was your business. Besides, Q023 has easier access to the Plaza shops and the Mall. Are you a student?”

“Yes.”

“Then you’ll be happy with the apartment I gave you. Hold your wristband to the scanner.”



She looked at the screen. “Okay, Miss Fale V. Argohdian, you may move in. Your wristband is coded to your door panel and will operate as long as your rent is deducted properly from your account.”

“Thank you.” Fale readjusted her black wristband. It was identical to the ones worn by every citizen of her city and fit permanently to her delicate wrist. The adjustable bands of youth were long gone for Fale; the one she wore now would be the one used to identify her remains one day. Fale shivered at the thought. The public used the coded bands for making purchases, checking out books, and identification, but also tracked each resident’s comings and goings for the Control Agency, the enforcers of the city’s law.

Fale left the office to find the large locker she had rented in the mall. The orange metal tomb held Fale’s every belonging, shoved into its relatively small space. She took the bags to Q023, dropped them on the entryway floor, then set off to find Nelson. Having visions always rattled Fale, but she had an uneasy feeling about Keron’s near escape and not getting the apartment from her earlier vision. She would explore her new home and unpack later; it felt more important to find some stability at this moment, and Nelson’s support was just what she needed. It would be a shorter walk from her new apartment.

Nelson, a college instructor, was an old friend of her father’s. Her mother had been gone since she was a baby and she had lived with her father in a small apartment. When Fale was eight, she came in from playing to find her father lying on the floor. She had seen the welting bruises on his face and the way his left leg was bent grossly to the side. He was covered in blood, and it pooled beneath him on the floor. Whoever had done this terrible thing to her gentle father had left him to die. Her heart thudded inside her, heavy, and she clutched her chest. Her throat seemed to ache and buckle, as bile forced its way into her mouth. Darkness covered her vision as she felt reality fading in her surprise and anguish. Luckily, fear had coated her tongue and kept her from screaming, or she may not have heard his whisper. She knelt by his side and listened to his last ramblings until his spirit flew to the stars.

“No,” she moaned and laid her head on his chest. She squeezed his hand, but for the first time, he didn’t squeeze back. She had no one then. No one to feed her or help her with the washing. She was a little girl; she couldn’t do anything, who would pay her rent? Would they come back for her, too?

Devastated, she had hidden on the streets of Algea’s Industrial district, fondly called Alloy City, for two weeks, mostly in crates packed with straw from the Harvest District. She had been in the back of the grocery, choosing the tiniest bunch of green grapes she could find, when the grocer’s wife came after her with a broom made of sticks. Fale had a plan to pay back all she had stolen, except to that vile woman. She was running from the store when the door scanner of the market caught her wrist band, not carefully hidden as usual, and reported her whereabouts to the Control Agency. The agents picked her up in the alley next to the grocer where she was hiding in a packing crate. The sound of their boots clomping down the alley had echoed against the tin walls. She had kicked and fought like they taught at the Takanori Core Training Center, but they dragged her out by her hair. Stinging tears tracked clean paths down her face as she struggled, and Fale stared at the evil grocer’s wife who was waiting by the shop door, clutching her broom. Fale glared her hatred at the woman who must have shown Control the alley, and the grocer’s wife smiled imperceptibly.

The city had no orphanage. If you had no parents, you became the ward of a manual labor house. First, you were an apprentice, then a merchant-in-training, and one day you would have a real job and live like the other adults. Everyone in Alloy City worked. A hearing had been underway to add Fale to the domestic force as an apprentice; a fancy way to say maid-in-training.

Nelson Wickarsham barged through the mahogany court doors and boomed, “From now on, I will keep her.”

The court quibbled over paperwork but was more than happy to sign Fale over to him. She remembered placing her tiny hand in his large one, and they went to live in his apartment over

the Takanori Core Training Center, also called the TacTrac, near the molten river.

From the industrial plant, the hub of the entire district, the molten river flowed with mixed metals too imperfect for forging. Fale didn't know exactly what they made in the plant; there were so many things being produced all the time. She felt like "the plant life" didn't affect her since she was just a student. She knew Techno Sector made things with wires, and the Engineering Design District made all the country's instrumental designs, but the Industrial District made pretty much anything metal. People like Keron, with stainless valezsan alloy appendages, had gotten their lost limbs from the Industrial plant, too. Those people had lost parts due to health reasons or on the job. Metal people, called fantocci, were owned by the Control Agency as bondsmen to repay society for the cost of their surgeries and upkeep. Taxpayers kept the fantocci alive, and many were not happy about it. In fact, fantocci were seen as sub-human by the general population who distrusted their strength and abilities.

She took a deep breath and entered Nelson's office with a smile, but he wasn't there. Shiny dark wood paneled Nelson's office from the floor to her hip, and navy blue painted the walls from there to the ceiling. A picture window on the wall adjacent to the door looked out on the city. Built into both side walls were full sized bookcases overflowing with a myriad of colors and spines of all thicknesses. Fale gazed at his bookcase lovingly and selected her favorite tome. The spine was cracked in so many places it was marred with white lines like a striped animal.

"What brings you here?" Nelson took long strides into the office and met her at the bookcase. He ushered her to a chair, then smoothed her hair and placed a gentle hand on her shoulder. He smiled and took a seat in the leather chair behind his desk, which made him appear intimidating, as college professors prefer. "Do you need credits?" He began to type into a keypad on his enormous desk. It was a dark wood, like most furniture found in Alloy City, from the forests existing before the city was born.

"No, no, nothing like that. Actually, I need some advice. Maybe I shouldn't have come,"

Fale stammered. She replaced the book and sat down on the navy pin-striped chair with her hands in her lap.

His gaze was stern from across the expanse of wood. “You can tell me anything. You know this.”

“I know. This is just... it’s unbelievable. Maybe I should go talk to Lisle.” She rose.

“What do you need with a wizard kid?” he scoffed.

“I need him because he practices wizardry, and he’s not a kid. He’s six months older than me.”

Nelson raised one black eyebrow. It matched the thick mass of black hair curled the tiniest bit over his collar, with the exception of some gray at his temples.

“You need a haircut,” she said.

“Fale. Don’t change the subject. What would you need with a wizard?” His ocean blue eyes narrowed. “What are you mixed up with?”

Fale sighed and paced in front of the desk like a caged tiger. Her palms were sweating, and she rubbed them down her legs. *How can I explain this without sounding crazy?* “It feels like I’ve been here before, in this situation. I don’t know. I’ve been having these visions-”

“Visions? What kind of visions?”

“Just... things happening. The weird part is...” She looked around the room before meeting his eyes. “Then the things really do happen.”

“We need to talk, Fale. Shut the door,” he ordered.

Fale closed the door and leaned against it.

“No. Oh no,” He paused and looked at his hands. “I didn’t know if this would actually become an issue. I’ve been in denial all these years.”

“What? Now you’re the one not making sense.” Fale squinted her eyes.

Nelson suddenly looked pale against his dark suit and tie. “Sit,” he said, then more gently, “please.”

She obeyed and clutched her hands in her lap, waiting anxiously for an explanation.

“Fale- your father knew about this.”

“What? How could he know? I was only eight when he- I don’t understand.” She shook her head in confusion.

“He had knowledge of things. Your father once asked me to protect you if anything happened to him.”

“Why would he do that? Why did he think you would need to?” She closed her wet eyes, thinking of her father, dying in her arms. Her heart clenched. Had he known he was in danger? Why had he never warned her? In an instant, she was a child again; not knowing who to trust, where to go. Her grief clawed out of her chest. She wanted to run and hide even though she knew she had to deal with the pain. Nelson would never see her as a warrior if she ceased to master this emotion, and she needed the support of her guardian and mentor. She let herself feel a pinprick of grief and smothered the rest in a sigh and a tentative smile.

“He was involved with people I didn’t know, Fale. People who met in secret. He told me you were not just any girl, but you are an extraordinary secret.”

Fale snorted a laugh. “Now you’re really talking crazy.” Of course, her father would think she was special to him, but to tell Nelson she was extraordinary? That was pushing it, in Fale’s mind. She was as “regular” as a girl could get. The secret part, she was starting to believe.

“I’m being serious. I didn’t know if there would be a trigger or an age, but he said you would have a gift of sight.”

The blood rushed to Fale’s stomach. This wasn’t funny anymore. “What did he say about

it?”

“Not much, he was very guarded. He said there was a purpose for you, and you would know it when the time was right to fight.” Nelson grimaced.

Puzzle pieces snapped into place. Things she never thought related, now fit neatly together. Daddy taking her to Nelson’s training center, the TacTrac, to train with the female Takanori warriors. The ancient stamped key, threaded around his neck, protected with his life, now lying warm next to her heart. It was said to have great power. Something political? Why hadn’t she cared to listen? What eight-year-old can remember all the old legends anyway? But a time to fight? Her? Fale had followed the ‘The Way of the Warrior,’ for ten years, but she was simply a girl in University. She didn’t know what she wanted from life, and her future was something she had pushed to the back of her thoughts. She had buried herself in training, learning the history of Algean Takanori, and practicing being mindful of the present. She worked to move beyond her past and not worry about what was to come. Fale had always thought she had time to figure things out later. She was barely able to control her emotions; it was a daily struggle. She hadn’t mastered her craft yet. She wouldn’t even be considered a Takanori warrior for four more years.

“Nelson, I can’t fight,” Fale lamented. “I don’t even know who I would be fighting against.”

“I’ve been preparing you all these years, just in case, but nobody said you had to. I don’t see anyone threatening you.”

“Yet.”

“Yet.”

They looked at each other somberly. Fale looked down at her shoulder bag laying on the floor. She fought to control the warring emotions inside her, aching to be unleashed as she imagined cutting each one down like bamboo mannequins during sword training.

“Do you have any plans for tonight? Have you been hanging out with the girl I introduced to you at the TacTrac?” Nelson clasped his hands on his desk.

“Oh, Izzy? Yes, we’ve become quite close recently. I knew her from the social club, but I hadn’t spent much time with her until she joined the TacTrac. And no, I don’t have any plans tonight.”

“Do you want to come home with me?” Nelson managed a smile. “We can cook dinner and play a few games of Bezique. You love beating me at cards.”

“Thanks, but I want to get my things settled. I prevented my vision from happening today at lunch, and the next one came out wrong. I wanted your opinion. Do you think there could be a connection? Do you think I started something?” A shiver of foreboding traced down her spine. Could changing one vision alter her future? What were the ramifications for cheating death? What had she done?

“Every action does cause an equal and opposite reaction. You may have set an undesirable chain of events into motion. We can’t be sure. Why don’t you tell me what happened?”

As Fale relayed the story of lunch time at the pub, Nelson gazed thoughtfully at her, as though he could see right through her to his office door. When she was finished, her brow was raised in anticipation. “Well, what do you think?”

“I think you saved the bondsman’s life by hiding his tools.”

“I know that much, but do you think it means anything?” Fale asked.

“If you stopped his death, then death may be looking for him. He may be in danger. Or you, Fale, for interfering.” Nelson leaned his head to his hands and massaged his silver temples.

“Or it could be nothing.” Fale hoped.

“You’re playing with fate. Maybe you’d better follow him home tonight, or hang out like young people do. Keep your eye out for danger because we can’t warn him,” Nelson suggested.

“He’d think I’m crazy,” she protested. “He might anyway.”

“But you’re friends, right?”

“Um, we used to be...” Fale’s face began to burn; she chewed on her lip.

“Fale?”

“Do we have to talk about *this*?” She started to sweat.

“Was he unkind to you?” Nelson planted his hands on the desk and began to rise.

“No!” Fale put her hands up. “I asked him out once, a long, long time ago. He shot me down. The whole ‘you’re too young and innocent’ thing. ‘It’s me, not you.’ You know. I was probably just really infatuated, but we are way beyond it now. I really don’t want to follow the guy around, okay?”

Nelson chuckled and propped his chin on his steepled hands. She glared at him. “Look, Fale, I know you can protect yourself, and so can he most likely, but neither one of you knows what’s coming for you; and the poor boy has no warning at all. Humor me. I will feel better tonight if I know you two can protect each other.”

“Fine,” Fale pouted. “I’ll look for him after I train. He’ll be walking home from work by then. I know his route,” she mumbled.

Nelson smiled at her. “I’ll ask the University Metaphysics professor what he thinks about changing visions, without mentioning you. Come to the apartment tomorrow night and we’ll figure this out.”

“I may need some of your books on legends. You might have to search for a few,” she thought out loud. If her father knew about the visions, maybe there was something related to the key she wore. His last words were forever etched into her memory like fingerprints in cement, “Guard this key, no matter what. It’s your destiny.” She whispered the words to herself.

“I’ll get some ready for you. What do you need?” Nelson asked.



“Anything about the Key of Effailya.” Maybe knowledge of the old novelty from her father would unlock some secrets to what was going on; maybe it would point the way to the secret people he met with. There had to be a reason it was passed down to her. As an eight-year-old, she had been so consumed by her sadness; she had never thought about researching it. That, and she had nowhere to look without telling others about the key. She had glanced over the books when Nelson got them but didn’t remember what they said. She couldn’t talk to people about it; she didn’t want anyone to realize the key she wore was important. It was her secret, and she kept it. She had made up stories when she was a child where she could find a princess locked in a tower and be the only Takanori warrior with the key to free her.

“They’ll be waiting with my secretary,” he said. Fale crossed the room and hugged Nelson around his thick neck. She could feel his muscles bunch as he gripped her tightly. “We’ll be all right, Fale. We always are.”

As he stroked her wild hair, Fale’s mind flashed back to many nights of them holding each other like this as she cried hysterically for her father. “I don’t know what to do with this gift. He didn’t tell me anything. He just left me.”

“I won’t.”

She held onto Nelson tightly, as if he were being pulled from her desperate fingers. He would always be there to save the day- or do his best to keep her safe- wouldn’t he? Instinctively, Fale knew this time no one would be able to protect her, and she could feel in her bones, things were about to get worse.

## CHAPTER 3

Fale fought hard at the TacTrac. She loved the peaceful atmosphere there. It was always so good to see the delicate art hanging on papery walls; to feel the shiny, smooth wooden floor; to smell the incense permeating the air in great white plumes of drifting smoke. That night, her regular evening training kept her mind tuned to her body, rather than her surroundings or her circumstances. The light and airy building was at odds with her heavy mood; she worked up a sweat, going through the motions with her brows drawn.

“You are on fire today,” Izzy panted.

“It feels good to empty my mind for a few hours,” Fale confessed.

After completing side, spin, heel, hook, rear and front thrust kicks, the girls went to cool down with abdominal work. As her body moved with fluid strength, Fale’s mind raced with anxious thoughts.

*What is happening to me lately? Do other people see visions, too? Do they come true? This is more like one of Nelson’s books, not my boring life. Why me? If Keron is in danger, then is it really up to me to halt fate again?*

Fale’s face scrunched as every question in her mind led to a new concern, but she had no answers. She desperately hoped Nelson could find any intel about her father’s friends. One person was all the connection they needed for a start. Maybe someone in the underground had information to offer.

“Want to talk about it?” Izzy prompted, her copper-colored skin glistening with perspiration.

“I can’t.” Seeing Izzy’s wounded look, she continued, “It’s about Keron.”

“Oooh.” Izzy nodded, thinking she understood. Izzy would automatically assume Fale’s pensiveness was due to residual feelings of affection for Keron and pain from his rejection. Even though it had been three years, Izzy was one of the few who knew how much it meant to her. Fale felt a lump of shame at misleading her friend, but now was not the time to disclose her mystery.

“Have you had any more of those weird feelings?” Izzy asked.

Fale vaguely remembered mentioning her tingling inklings to Izzy during a walk a few weeks ago. Fale didn’t know what brought it to Izzy’s mind now, so she was stunned into silence. What should she say? How much should she disclose?

“Hello? Fale?”

“Yes? I mean, no. I haven’t. Just a few.” She trusted Izzy, but everything was different now. She had changed a vision; what else had she changed? If Nelson thought she could be in danger, she didn’t want to bring Izzy and the TacTrac into it. Izzy might workout at the TacTrac, but she would not do well with real danger. It was better to say nothing. She shook her head sharply.

“Well, I’m here if you need me.” Izzy began leg lifts, propping her head with her hand, her hair sectioned into short two-inch braids spiked all around her head like a shiny black cactus. She smiled. It was the great thing about Izzy. She wouldn’t pry, but she would be there in a second if Fale needed her.

“I know you are.” Fale copied Izzy’s movements, and they finished their workout.

“Hey, do you wanna go on a call with me?” Izzy sat up and stretched her leg, touching her toes.

“What do you do?”

“Oh, it’s easy. The D.O.C. takes a big basket of food and stuff to some poor family who’s

recently lost the mom or dad to the fantocci barracks.” Iz switched legs.

“The D.O.C.?”

“Daughters of Control- we help out.”

“Yeah. It’s awful,” Fale said. “I thought fantocci lived at home?”

“They can’t support a family and pay back society at the same time, silly.”

“I guess not. If you think the fantocci owe society.” Fale pushed up on her elbow.

“Of course they do. Those poor people go through all those surgeries and stay at the hospital for a long time. Somebody has to pay for all of that- and the taxpayers do, so they have to pay it back.”

“But for their whole life?” Fale sat with her knees locked and stretched toward her toes.

“Well, you have to think, there’s more than one surgery- and plastic surgery- and fantocci make very little money. Plus, you must figure in the people who don’t make it; and those who don’t adjust to their new body part. Who pays for them?”

“Other fantocci?”

“Exactly. You got it.” Izzy beamed at Fale.

“What about the families?” Fale would hate to lose Nelson from an injury.

“They can go and visit at the barracks any time they want.”

Fale stopped stretching and asked, “Any time?”

“During visiting hours, of course. It’s why I’m going so late, the family I’m visiting tonight is over at the barracks. The father lost a foot and half a hand.”

“What happened?” Fale asked.

“The machine at the plant dropped smelt on his foot, and he reacted, trying to wipe it off,

but the gloves they have aren't fireproof- not enough, apparently.”

“Oh no.”

“So, do you want to come with me?” Izzy grabbed a towel and wiped off her face.

“I can't tonight; I have things to do.” Fale wiped her face as well.

Showered and changed, they exchanged a one- armed hug and Fale hoisted her shoulder bag across her body then set out to find Keron. She left the polished floors and papery walls of the TacTrac for the harsh metal buildings and concrete of downtown Alloy City.

Fale worked up her confidence as she walked downhill toward an area of town that turned darker as she went. The colors on buildings looked dull and rusted from lack of upkeep and lights were broken or burned out. The streets there had no trash maintenance, and Fale stepped lightly around a colorless lump of plastic. It was not as bad as the ghetto quarter nearest the plant, where visitors breathed through their mouths rather than gag on the fumes of a range of human odors, but it was definitely lacking in charm.

She saw him coming toward her, down the empty street she'd expected, his ginger hair curling from the heat of his long day of hard labor. Unlike most bondsmen, he carried his tools proudly. He hated being a servant, she knew, but he loved an honest day of earning his keep. Keron's eyes were downcast, but Fale knew from memory that they were bluer than the blazing fire from the industrial torches at the plant. Long feathered lashes dusted freckled cheeks angled sharply to a remarkable jaw. He wore a green t-shirt, faded and soiled with handprints in oil and paint. His blue denims hung on his lean hips by a cracked leather belt bearing silver metal studs which happened to match his metal arm. Keron's right arm and leg had been replaced by anatomically correct stainless valezsan as a child when they were burned beyond use in the plant where he was an apprentice. Stainless valezsan alloy, the strongest metal on the planet, was lightweight and highly resistant to corrosion. Commonplace in the buildings of alloy city, it's expense made it very valuable around the country. Putting it in humans, though, somehow

lowered their value substantially. Her heart clenched in her chest with a familiar ache for him. The sight of him turned her insides upside down. She shook off her old feelings for him and worked to be neutral; she took some deep breaths. Fale watched him walk, his boot strings bouncing up and down, as he walked past one more building. Then she announced herself by clearing her throat.

“Hi.” She put up a hand. “You walking home?”

*Dumb question, Fale.*

“Yeah.” He grinned with one side of his mouth. “What’re you doing out this way?”

“I was actually looking for you.”

“Found me.” He flashed a white toothed smile. “What’cha need? Got somethin’ broken?”

*Just my heart.*

“Um, no. I was, ah, wondering what you were up to? If you wanted to, um, do anything? Get a pint?”

“Fale - I -”

“No, please, don’t think it’s like... I’m asking as a friend. Promise.”

Keron looked around warily. “This isn’t a good time, Fale. You shouldn’t even be in this part of town after dark.”

“Pshaw.” Fale pulled up her shoulders. “I’m a warrior.” She laughed nervously.

Keron rolled his eyes. “All right. Come with me. I gotta shower; then I’ll walk you home.”

“But-“

“Let me think about it, ‘kay?”

“Okay.”

Fale heard the tinny crashing of a metal door nearby and spun into a defensive position with her legs apart, one hand up and the other reaching for the concealed dagger at her hip. Nothing jumped out at them. They stood in the circle of light from a working street lamp and peered into the darkness to watch a three-footed dog run into the street. Fale blew out the breath she had been holding and relaxed.

Keron chuckled. "Wow. You're jumpy. I thought the TacTrac brought you peace and quiet and all that."

"It does. Usually. But I have scary things on my mind." Fale turned her head as *she saw a vision of herself and Keron running for their lives through a building full of sleeping people, about to be caught by-*

"Hey. You okay?" Keron grabbed her shoulder and spun Fale around to face him.

"I don't know," she said shakily, looking into his eyes, a full head higher than hers.

"You were making a choking noise." He narrowed his eyes.

"Sorry." She scanned the area.

"There's nothing there. Let's go before you creep me out."

"Keron, I -"

"Well, what do we have here?" Three men stepped out of the shadow of the apartment building in front of them. The one in front was so dirty his skin could have been any color, but he bore the burn scars of a plant worker. He was the one who spoke.

"A metal Fanty and a lady. Wonder what they's doin' in *our* part o' town. Huh, guys?" The other two nodded and smiled; one drew a knife. "We'll be takin' those tools and the bag if'n ya don't mind." The man held his hand out and curled his fingers a few times.

"Oh, I mind." Keron grinned, he'd been ready for this fight all day. He was always ready and excited to engage, but being denied a full fight with the Rowdies at lunch had probably

increased his desire for violence with the trio of attackers. He readied his battle stance. With his tools next to him, Keron sunk just a little, turned his left hip out, and pulled scarred fists up to his chest.

“Keron, no! You don’t understand!” Fale jumped in front of him.

“What the- ?” Keron’s stunned shout was so vehement, Fale jumped. She turned her head toward him to explain, and the man took his opportunity to rush them. He grasped Fale around the neck in a chokehold from behind, and wrapped his other arm around her ribcage, dragging her backward as the other two men closed in on Keron.

“That’s okay,” the stranger hissed into her ear, “the key probably idn’t in dat bag anyway. Is it, sweetheart? How ‘bout we’s takin’ apart metal man to find it? He got any spare hidey holes?”

“Leave him alone,” she gasped, clawing futilely at his arm.

“So, the metal man’s the ticket, eh? Thanks, sweetheart. We be takin’ real good care o’ both o’ you.” The man’s spittle clung to Fale’s ear lobe. Her mind spun as she struggled to loosen his grip, but he jammed his other forearm under her chin, making it hard to breathe.

*Keron doesn’t know what he’s getting into.*

“Keron,” Fale squeaked a warning as she saw him pull out his blade and pick up his mallet. They were Keron’s favorite fighting, and winning, combination. Fale knew from Izzy’s tales, he was lethal in the underground Agency fights, but she was also no damsel in distress. Fale spread her legs wide and took a step around her attacker’s leg. She brought her arm over to wrap the man’s hands with her left arm and spun around, trapping the man’s hands between their bodies. Then she elbowed him in the face, kicking her knee into his groin. The man grunted as he dropped her hands and bent over. She ran to Keron, who was facing off the other two men. Fale drew her dagger and briefly registered the surprise on all three men’s faces. *Stupid men*, she rolled her eyes. She disarmed the one in a skullcap and Keron mashed the other one in the ear



with his mallet. Fale thought she saw brain matter fly from his head. Uck.

“Let’s go!” Fale pulled Keron’s t-shirt and began to run in the opposite direction of the stunned, but recovering men. Keron snatched his tool kit from the ground, and they ran into the next alley with the speaker and the man in the skullcap in pursuit. Apparently, a mallet to the ear was a game ender for the third guy. Fale ran lightly over the debris in the alley. Keron ran with the stamina of a ring fighter. They made turn after turn, but their assailants pursued them doggedly.

Keron opened a blue door on the side of a brick building. “In here,” he directed. Fale didn’t have time to see the sign next to the door.

When her eyes adjusted, she found herself in a shelter fully housed with a crush of sleeping or near sleeping homeless people. Fale’s earlier vision slammed into her brain. *A shelter where we’re running for our lives...* They were coming for her. How could she change it? Since the last one was wrong, would this one automatically be wrong too? She couldn’t take the chance. They ran between people and over bags, pillows, and toys.

Out of breath, Fale asked, “Have we lost them?” The blue door cracked open. “Get down,” Fale whispered furiously, pulling Keron’s denims as she squatted on the floor between two cots. They heard arguing at the door. There was no way to turn the overheads on after lights-out in a city shelter. Keron had chosen the perfect hiding place. There was a creak as the door slowly opened wider, throwing light across the room.

Keron pushed Fale down onto the floor and gently lowered himself on top of her. She tried to move into a more appropriate position, one which didn’t have his arms bracing his body over her. He settled more firmly on top of her to hold her into place. “Keron,” she whispered.

“Ssshhh,” he whispered softly in her ear.

*Down, girl.* Fale attempted to control her breathing and waited until the attackers left, but the door stayed open and footsteps squeaked across the linoleum slowly.

“Fale?” A man’s loud whisper. “Fale, we knows you in here.”

Fale’s eyes popped open, and she stared into Keron’s questioning gaze. She shook her head slightly to his silent query. Everything in her wanted to pull Keron up and bolt for the opposite door, some primal instinct to *run*, but in order to change her vision, she had to remain where she was. Her hands were shaking where they held Keron’s forearms, as the men got closer.

“They not here. She’s gotta be a runner. Tha’s what they be sayin’ on the com-box. C’mon, let’s us find another one, we gotta hurry.” The footsteps receded, and the door slammed shut. Fale and Keron lie there, chest to chest, his hips burning into hers for the longest fifteen minutes of her life. It was as hard to be still as her first meditation.

*Focus, Fale.*

“Are you two gonna lay there all night? You’re on my blanket.” A silver- haired woman on the cot standing next to them began to pull the edge of her blanket from underneath Fale.

“Oh. Sorry.” Fale rolled and bumped foreheads with Keron.

“Ouch,” he whispered. Fale was relieved the darkness hid her flaming cheeks.

Keron lifted himself off her, and she scooted to a sitting position. He offered his hand to her and lifted her up; then they tiptoed out. They began a hesitant walk through the alleys.

~\*~

“Okay, Fale. Spill. Why were those guys chasing us?” The street was clear, and they were going back to Keron’s apartment. The cold night air nipped at their fingertips like silent fish in dark water.

“I already told you I don’t know who they were. How would I know why they were chasing us?”

“They knew you, Sprout.” Keron sounded exasperated. He had been calling her Sprout since she was fifteen and still developing. It galled her that he couldn’t see she was a grown woman with a real problem.

“I am *not* a sprout anymore. Don’t you get it?”

“No. I don’t.” They were both whisper-shouting now in the street in front of Keron’s building. “I don’t ‘get’ any of this. It’s almost like you knew they were comin’. Why were you really lookin’ for me tonight? What’d this have to do with me? What’ve you dragged me into?”

“You don’t have to be a part of any of it. You’re right. Go home. I don’t care. Take care of yourself. I can- Wait. They said they *knew* I was a runner, didn’t they? They said they heard it on a com-box?” Her eyes widened in fear.

“Yeah, but-“

“No. Shut up. We shouldn’t be here. You can’t go home.” She looked up and down the street.

“The hell I can’t. It’s right there.” He pointed to his window.

“No, I mean they KNOW. Whoever it is, knows my visions.”

“What’re you talking about?” He had lifted both hands into the air.

“I can’t tell you yet. You have to trust me. Please, Keron. I need you to trust me.”

“Where’m I supposed to go?” He dropped his hands in resignation. She must have looked pitiful. She didn’t know if he trusted her, but it was clear he felt sorry for her. Maybe he thought she was crazy.

“I’m not crazy,” she said.

“Maybe you had a hard day? If you’re having visions...”

“This is real. Those men were real.” She looked up at him, pleading for belief with her

eyes.

“Fine,” he sighed. “What now?”

“We can only go someplace they don’t expect,” Fale thought out loud, trying to think of all the places she could go. *No, think about where you wouldn’t go...* “I’ve got it. Come on; it’s not safe here.”

“Where are we going?”

“My new apartment. No one knows where it is. Then tomorrow we’ll talk to Nelson. He’ll know what to do.”

“I’ll go to your place, but then you’d better *explain.*” He crossed his arms over his chest.

“I’ll try, I’m truly sorry about all this. Maybe you really will think I’m crazy.”

## CHAPTER 4

“How’s it work?” Keron asked as they sat facing one another on a pastel brocade sofa, each with a bottle of light brown ale and a sandwich. Luckily, Fale had made time to stop at the grocery before her evening classes. The small space had come with furniture that looked like it belonged in a retirement complex. The modest living area led to an eat-in kitchen, connected on the other side to one bedroom and a bath. Fale set her bag in her lap and leaned into the sunken cushions. She briefed him on her day and the realization of her new gift while they unpacked what they needed for the night from her bags.

“I get these scenes in my head. I guess somebody else must see them, too. Then they happen.”

“What did you see tonight?”

“I saw us running through the sleeping people and being caught.” She gazed into his impossibly blue eyes. “You see? That’s how I know someone sees my vision. They were *expecting* me to run through the room. I stopped, but it was hard. I was *supposed* to be running away.”

“It is what they said.” He looked more than a little wary. “What’re we up against, Fale?”

“I have no idea,” she said. *We?* “You don’t have to be involved in this, you know.”

“Can’t just leave you alone, while someone’s after you.”

Fale sat up straighter. “I have Nelson,” she said.

“Right. Him,” Keron said. “Well, I’ll take you there tomorrow then. I gotta work in the morning, but I’ll take you to him. Just to make sure you’re safe.”

“Thanks,” she yawned.

“Who knows what you see, though? Doesn’t make sense.”

“I was hoping to ask Lisle if he had any clues. He could consider his crystals or whatever he does.” She shrugged, making the hem of her extra-large University t-shirt ride up her leg to the large men’s boxer shorts she wore. His gaze darted quickly from her toned thigh. Could it be he was not as immune to her as he professed to be? She felt warmth flood her veins.

“Are you sure you want to mess with his voodoo stuff? Or whatever he does?”

“Not really,” she admitted, “But I need answers, and this isn’t normal. Maybe it’s a spell or some kind of potion?”

“You believe that?”

“No. Not if my father knew about it. How could I be ‘extraordinary’ though? I mean all these years have gone by and I’ve tried to be a hero, but I’m nothing special, trust me.”

“Know what you mean,” he said.

“Thanks,” she laughed.

“No. I mean, it’s not you, it’s me,” his words tumbled out.

Fale laughed even harder, and Keron looked confused as to why his statement would hit her as so funny.

“I’ve already heard that line from you,” she hiccupped. “Sorry, Fale, it’s not you; it’s me.” She fell over laughing, exposing another muscled thigh.

He blushed furiously and tossed the nearest quilt over her lap. He tugged it down to her knees with one hand and took her empty bottle with the other. “I think you’re tired,” he said.

“Yeah,” she wiped at her eyes. “It’s been a super long day. You don’t know how terrifying it is to have visions, and know you have to change them to save your life, or someone else’s.”

“Guess I don’t,” he said, pushing a curl of hair out of her face.

Fale looked at Keron. "I'm not sorry I saved your life, even if you have to be stuck with me tonight."

"Are you drinking truth serum?" he joked.

Fale swatted at him. "I'm being serious." She was heating up from her core. Was it embarrassment, or too much ale? Probably both.

"Okay," he said, and she saw the twinkle in his eye. "I'm glad, too. Thank you, Fale."

She reached for him. He drew her into his arms and hugged her securely.

"Mmmm," she purred. "You smell good."

*Definitely too much ale.*

He laughed, "It's post shower."

She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and held him close. Within a minute, she was fast asleep. She stirred when Keron got up to turn out the lights, but sighed when he tucked himself behind her on the couch. Maybe after being on his own for a while, it felt as good to him as it did to her, to hold someone again.

When Fale woke, she was mortified to find herself on the couch lying in Keron's arms. What had she said last night? The heat of her face radiated down into her empty stomach. *Must have coffee.* Her head was resting on Keron's left bicep, and his heavy right arm held her ribcage, his metal leg was thrown over hers in a possessive position. She slowly lifted his arm and wiggled out from underneath, then stole a peek at his sleeping face. Auburn stubble spotted his normally smooth jaw and his mouth... his mouth began to grin as she watched him. She gasped in surprise and he winked at her. She laughed, "Want some coffee?"

"Need. Coffee," he droned. Fale laughed again; this was a good morning. She hadn't woken up in anyone's arms since, well, forever. Nelson didn't count. It seemed like he had

always been with her. In fact, the day to day memories of her father got fuzzier with each passing birthday.

Fale was fixing up mugs of steaming hot java while Keron showered. “How many sugars?” she called when the water stopped.

“Black,” came a muffled reply.

Fale made hers a nice light brown with flavored cream. “Ready,” she called to him again.

Keron stepped from the blue-carpeted bedroom into the eggshell tiled kitchen in his signature jeans and t-shirt. His hair curled at the tips from the hot shower. The snug t-shirt he wore showed how very lean he was, but also how well he trained his defined muscles. Fale handed him a cobalt mug with a golden stag and Central Credit symbol on it before she began to stare outright, or embarrass herself by drooling.

She went into the bedroom and dressed in tan muslin pants and a cream fitted shirt. She hoped Keron would like the way the material gathered under her bust to cinch in her waist and flare at her hips. She was braiding her hair into a long four strand French plait at her bathroom vanity when the vision hit.

*She was transferred to her first class of the day, listening and taking notes when a letter arrived at her class for her excusal. Thinking it must be Nelson, she quickly picked up her things and left, but when Fale got to the hallway, it was an unfamiliar suited man. Her eyes widened. She turned to run, but he used her pivot to pull her body back against him and held a handkerchief to her nose and mouth. She kicked her feet and dropped her books to grab his arms, but she moved in slow motion then, feeling her limbs get heavy, and her head expand. Everything went black...*

“Fale!” Keron shouted at her.

“Hmmm?” she said. “Owww.” Fale put a hand to her forehead and gingerly touched a



growing lump, sucking her breath in through her teeth.

“You okay?” He sat on the bathroom floor and held her head in his lap.

“What am I doing on the floor?”

“That was my question.” He smiled weakly. “What were you doin’?”

“I had a vision.” She licked her suddenly dry lips.

“You always do this?”

“Not always; but in this vision, I blacked out.” She raised her head to sit, a tingle sweeping up the back of her neck; from embarrassment or a lingering twinge of fear, she wasn’t sure.

“Don’t get up yet. You hit your head on the vanity.”

“Did you see me fall?”

“Nope. The corner’s imprinted on your forehead. Hope you don’t mind, I used your towel to slow the bleeding.”

“Oh.” Fale lay looking up at him. *Just breathe.* “I think I’m going to have a headache.”

“Probably.” He gently touched her swelling wound with the towel and she winced. “Can you remember your vision?”

“I always do. It showed me I can’t go to class this morning. Someone’s waiting outside my classroom to drug me, or poison me, or kidnap me. I don’t know what they want with me.” She looked at Keron as a shiver danced across her shoulders. “Except I saved you. And I think, something to do with an old legendary trinket my dad gave me before he died.”

“What’s the legend?” Keron’s curiosity made him look younger than normal. His eyes were wide, and his face relaxed. He picked up a piece of Fale’s hair and unconsciously rubbed it between his fingers.

“I don’t know. It’s why I asked Nelson, he has books about it. Old, forbidden books he

bought on the underground market. I only considered it because the guy in the alley asked me about it.”

“What?” Keron nearly dropped Fale’s head. “You’re bringing this up now? Why didn’t you mention it before?”

“It’s so preposterous,” she said, trying to sit up, but he put a hand on her chest and shook his head.

“The whole thing is crazy. You should’ve told me, Fale.”

“I feel silly talking to you like this, let me up,” she pleaded.

“Not yet. You’re bleeding again. So, what’s this trinket?” He pressed the towel firmly to her brow.

“A key,” she eeked out in pain.

“Just a key?” He cocked his head and raised his brows in doubt.

“No. I’m named after it, and its owner. Fale comes from Effailya,” she said meekly, raising her eyebrows. “It’s called the Key of Effailya.”

“The Key of Eff...” he sputtered, slowly shaking his head.

“Yeah. You’ve heard of it?”

“Do you have it? Where is it?” he whispered as if suddenly they were being overheard.

“I always have it.” She began to move.

“Relax,” he said.

“No, it’s here.” She pulled the worn brown leather cord from around her neck and the key from its place between her breasts. The key itself looked bronze in color, the blade notched symmetrically, and the bow stamped in an ancient language with a decorative hole. The entire thing was probably two and a half inches long.

“Whoa.” Keron blew his breath out through his pursed lips.

“So, you think it’s the key they’re after?” Fale asked.

“Well, ah, yeah. Makes more sense than being after me,” Keron said. “It’s a priceless antique, but that’s all I know about it. I think we need to find out all we can about this key. Rumors in the underground whisper, it was lost somewhere in the illegal selling bays, or it was taken by Control. What’s it go to anyway?”

“All part of the mystery. As well as what any of this has to do with me.” Fale ran her fingers absently over the key’s smooth blade. “My father was holding it when I found him, the night he died. He told me it was mine, and to protect it at all cost. He was the only one who could help me understand this and now I have to discover what it all means on my own.” Tears of loss and frustration streaked toward her temples and he caught them with his thumbs.

“You’re not on your own, Fale.” Keron angled his head toward her.

She pushed herself up. “Keron, I already told you-“

“Ssshhh.” He wrapped his warm hand around the side of her neck and laid his thumb on her jaw, pulling her head toward him.

The doorbell rang. They sat where they were and stared at each other. It rang again, but neither of them moved. Fale’s expression asked him silently what to do, but Keron held up his hand and frowned.

“Who could it be?” Keron whispered. “Did ya tell anyone where you moved?” The visitor began knocking.

“Maybe it’s the mail-boy?” she answered, shrugging her shoulders. “But they delivered my mail on Tuesdays at my other apartment.”

“Don’t think so. Are you late for your first class yet?” His focus darted toward the bedroom, planning an escape.

“Not yet, but whoever has my visions knows we have been warned.” She searched her mind. No one she could think of would find her here. After several long minutes, the person went away. “What should we do?”

Keron brushed a stray hair off her shoulder, making her skin goosebump. “Let’s get those books from Nelson. I can find something to do there, and say I’m working. Then I really do have to go in.”

“Thanks again.” Fale smiled, re-tucking the key back into its hideaway.

Fale breezed into Nelson’s office building. Nelson would have the solution. His secretary was absent, so she entered his office with a soft knock.

“Come in,” he boomed. “Oh, Fale, you’re back sooner than I expected.”

Fale and Keron crossed into Nelson’s office together and walked to his desk as he rose.

“Nelson, this is Keron.” The men nodded to each other. Fale watched Nelson’s eyes as they took in Keron’s mechanical parts. In all the times she had mentioned his name, she had never hinted at his livelihood as a fantocci, and she had purposely left his name out of the conversation the day before. When he scanned her face with steely eyes, she winced.

“So, you’re Keron, huh? Fale didn’t mention you were the bondsman whose life she saved.” Nelson turned to Fale and touched his forehead, indicating her bandaged wound. “What happened to you?”

“Oh, that.” Fale tenderly felt her bulging injury. “I had a vision this morning.” Her eyes found Keron’s and her lips tilted into a hesitant smile.

“She passed out in the bathroom. Hit her head on the vanity,” he explained as Nelson began to look irritated. “I stopped the blood and took care of her, sir.” Unfortunately, it didn’t seem to help Nelson’s mood.

“What were you doing there?” Nelson asked Keron.

“Nelson,” Fale said, exasperated. “You wanted me to look after him.”

“Not all night.” Nelson stared at her in shock. “You told him?”

“He knows everything,” she stated flatly. “We were chased last night. He had to stay at my place.” To his sour face she said, “He slept on the couch.”

*Of course, so did I.* Fale repressed a childish urge to laugh.

“Tell me what happened,” Nelson said gruffly. Fale raised her eyebrow. “About the chase,” he amended.

“First, do you have something for Keron to fix, so he can be working?”

“Oh, yes, bondsman. I have an uneven drawer in my desk that has annoyed me for a long time.” Nelson pointed the way, staying two steps back, and emptied his drawer at arm’s length, as if being metal were contagious. Nelson’s disdain for the fantocci was a learned discrimination, older than he was. A muscle flexed in Keron’s jaw as he swiped his bracelet over the scanner on Nelson’s desk and got to work filing. For a moment, Fale flashed angry bolts of indignation at Nelson on Keron’s behalf, but soon her anger gave way to excitement as she recounted their previous night’s tale to Nelson in detail.

“He whispered he thought the key was probably not in my bag, then mentioned it was most likely hiding in one of Keron’s parts, then I dropped him.” Keron looked up briefly- she hadn’t told him that part.

“That’s my girl.” Nelson’s spine straightened, and he hooked his thumbs in his pockets.

“Keron took the other two and we ran.” She looked at Keron, bent over working. How could such a strong, capable man worry about being unworthy or unequal? It was silly. He had proven himself as a man among men in the fights, over and again, but it wasn’t enough for him.

“You helped.” Keron pushed on his wood planer.

“Yes, well, you found the perfect hiding place.”

Nelson looked back and forth between the two of them and frowned. He put his arm around Fale. “I’m glad you’re safe. Why bring up the key, though? I thought it was strange, you having a sudden interest in it. It’s come down your family line in secret, I know; but what does it have to do with your visions? What does it have to do with this, ah-- young man?” He glanced at Keron. “No offense to you.”

“None taken, sir.”

“We think the key is what they are after. And someone knowing my visions has me on my toes. It’s been helpful having Keron around.”

“I’ll just bet it has,” Nelson said sourly. He lowered his voice, “I can take better care of you. I’m stable, wiser and have more resources. Fale, come home.”

“I have my own home. What’s gotten into you?” she whispered.

“Nothing.” He put his hand on her back and his head close to her ear. “You didn’t tell me he was one of... them. I don’t want to see anyone take advantage of you. A needy young woman on her own...”

“You just hang on.” She pointed at his chest. “I can take care of myself. You’ve seen to that. Now let me do it.”

Keron appeared to smother a cough-chuckle as he checked the smoothness of his work with a sand block.

“Fine. I have the books you wanted over here.” Nelson pulled a small stack of ancient looking volumes with faded jewel colored covers, from another desk drawer.

“I’ll be careful with them,” Fale promised, gently packing them in her shoulder bag. It was the same bag she used every day, stuffed with everything from exercise clothes and weapons to school books and lip gloss. It was a military green canvas bag patched with blue denim, coral,

and crimson blocks and a lemon pinstripe. The bag was ugly and worn, but comfortable. Nelson had acquired the bag for her years ago when a street vendor traveled to Alloy City from the Textile Mills. He bought it because it reminded him of someone he had known long ago, he said. It felt like home to Fale.

“Take all the time you need,” Nelson said. “What can I do?”

“Can you find out any more info on my dad?” she asked hopefully. “He had to know more. Maybe those people he knew, maybe they have clues.”

“Fale. Those people could be the reason your father is dead.” Nelson’s brow furrowed.

“But maybe they aren’t, maybe they were friends,” she said. Either way, they had to know something.

“I can’t intentionally put you in danger.” He pushed little circles into his temples with the pads of his fingers.

“Do you think I’m not in danger already?” she scoffed.

Keron looked up. “She can fight, and so can I.”

“You stay out of this,” Nelson snapped.

“I’m part of this now,” Keron protested. “If they want to take me apart for this key... and if she needs me.”

“That’s it. She doesn’t need you. And I know what you’re after. She’s only 18, for goodness’ sake. What are you- 30? She doesn’t need you lurking around her apartment.” Nelson gestured toward Fale as she slowly ran her palm down her face. It was obvious Nelson couldn’t think of a good reason why Keron would want to hang around her, except to take advantage of her. Somehow, it was more insulting than it should have been.

“I’m 24, and she’s growing up, sir. Fale makes her own choices. You’ll have to get used to it.” Keron slammed the finished drawer shut, his face a burning ember.

“Get out.” Nelson pointed toward the door.

“Gladly.” Keron picked up his tools and walked out.

“Keron-” Fale started, turning toward the door.

“Let him go,” Nelson said, putting his arm in the doorway.

“Go to the library. I’ll meet you there at noon for lunch,” he shouted from the hallway without turning back.

Fale stood with her mouth open. She watched Keron’s retreat and turned back to Nelson with a glare. *Did that really just happen?*

“You guys are acting like mongrels fighting over meat. I am a person, you know.”

Nelson sighed. “I’m sorry, Fale. I think you’re too young to be involved with him... and he’s a bondsman. No one will ever be good enough for you in my eyes. But you can certainly do better than that- uh, him.” He ran a hand through his hair and sighed again. “I’m afraid to lose you, in any way. This nonsense has me worried.”

She relaxed and hugged him around his middle. “You won’t lose me. Ever. We’re connected. No one else would have taken me home from the gutter, cleaned me up, given me a home and loved me all these years.”

“You know I do.”

“I love you, too, but next time be nicer to my friends.” She laughed as he took a deep breath, like an orator about to make a long rebuttal. She raised an eyebrow, then he laughed too, kissing the top of her head.

Fale said goodbye and walked from Barton Hall to the University campus. It was springtime in mid-April and the sun was warm on her shoulders. The breeze was soft and balmy, and it gently swayed the potted plant life. Alloy City was not naturally a place filled with greenery, but the University made a point to have potted plants and flowers at even intervals



about campus. Today it loaned a fresh feeling to the manmade metal city.

Fale came to the huge set of library steps and looked up into the dark recessed entrance of the massive building. Some said this used to be an adjunct to the castle grounds hundreds of years ago. The castle foundation still lay behind the University in an outline of rubble, like the castle had been lifted completely from its base. By this age, all the history had been wiped out. She wouldn't find any information on the old legends in the library. All history and legend that didn't agree with the current state of government had been burned or hidden in the underground. She was lucky Nelson had found her three books on the right subject. He must have known one day she would want to know more about the key. She smiled to herself. Of course he did.

Once inside, she quickly found a section on Industrial Engineering where she thought no one would bother her and followed the long row back until she came to the outer wall of the library. Deep in the soulless stacks, there were fewer lights to conserve energy, and glowing orbs could be borrowed from the front desk if needed in the evening. But during the day, natural light poured in from the stained-glass cathedral windows, and the light was adequate. She quickly discovered a table and green leather chair. Fale checked and re-checked her surroundings before taking out her books, notecards, and pen.

She spent the next few hours reading until she found what she needed and made condensed notes. One color of notecards for each source. They were all very different. One was a partial story, one a political agenda, and one a fairy tale. Finally, it was noon, and Fale packed up her things. She tapped down the library steps to a smiling Keron. He was kinder than she remembered him being, and his smile sent her stomach fluttering like cotton on the breeze. Thinking of falling for him again made her want to frown, but she pulled her lips into a slight grin and waved.

"Find anything?" he asked.

"Lots," she answered. "Do you want to see?"

“Let’s eat first.”

“Sure, I’ll follow you.”

The nearest deli had scuffed tile floors in black and white squares. The sandwich counter was high, and surrounded with padded barstools in the strangest shade of purple, almost red. Keron led Fale to a table in the back, away from the giant window allowing passersby to notice them. The plaster on the walls had begun to chip away a few years ago, revealing a mural of shining colors. A castle with a red flag. The owner allowed people to pull pieces of it down one day to see the painting. Control officers swarmed the room, pulling patrons out and pushing the shopkeeper. No one understood what happened that day. The paper said nothing, but the colors were replastered and painted black, then the deli changed hands.

Fale stared out the window at nothing, her eyes glazed over.

“Having a vision?” Keron looked concerned.

“Just thinking,” she said. “You need to see what I found, and then I’m going to Lisle’s.”

“Think I can go back to my apartment? I need new clothes and a toothbrush. Actually, do you think anybody would expect you to stay at my place tonight?” Keron finished chewing his sandwich and licked his finger and thumb. “I still don’t like the knocking from this morning.”

“I don’t see why you couldn’t get your things, nobody’s called you by name. They only seem to know you from being around me. Maybe I should leave you alone? I’m sure I’ll be fine.”

“Fale, strangers are calling your name and trying to attack you. I’d feel more comfortable if you stuck with me. Just for the night.”

“Fine. Let’s swing by to get my stuff and I’ll show you my notes while we’re there.” Fale shoved down her nervous excitement and dusted crumbs off her lap with a crinkled paper napkin.

Fale and Keron swiped their wristbands to pay for their food and report their location to the

Control Agency. Fale had learned early in her lessons, each city in Algea had its own system for enforcing its regulations and knowing the whereabouts of its people. She didn't even consider going to Control about her followers though, because everyone knew it was better to stay off their radar. Life could be made miserable by the intrusion of the Control Agency; they decided what society believed and what history was accepted. An entire future could be ruined by saying the wrong word to the wrong person; jobs were lost, personal belongings confiscated, children were taken, apprenticeships begun where Control needed people most... usually in the Industrial Plant. Fale was too comfortable in her schooling at the University and work at the TacTrac to get Control involved. She didn't want to lose what she had, including her freedom, by involving the Agency's focus on her life. She believed she should solve this mystery on her own, no matter the cost. The shop bell's metallic buzzing as they left sent shivers of foreboding along Fale's skin like the screech of the injury whistle at the Industrial Plant.

To take her mind off of her worries, Fale talked to Keron about childhood things on the way to her apartment. Keron had taken very rudimentary lessons due to his apprenticeship and Fale had mostly been tutored in the TacTrac, with the exception of social learning classes, until she reached the University. They talked about favorite past-times and found common ground in a love of fiction. Fale explained her enjoyment of card games and Keron listened intently.

“Ever have a pet?” he asked.

“I had a spiny fish,” she answered wistfully, “It had the prettiest scales. They were all iridescent, throwing out shades of blue and green and purple, with spiked fins. I named it Noxilus.”

“Noxilus?”

“I made it up.” She shrugged and looked up at him with a shy smile. “How about you? Can fantocci keep pets?”

“I could, I suppose, now. Not when I was a kid, though. I did have a worm in a box named Charley, but he didn’t live very long. My mentor wasn’t pleased with a box of dirt under my cot. Charley went out with the garbage after a week.” Keron flashed an adorable sideways grin.

It hit Fale how differently they had grown up even under the same set of unfortunate circumstances. Being an orphan, she could have been a domestic apprentice and be working her fingers down to bony nubbins cleaning people’s homes right now, belonging to the domestic guild for the rest of her life. She had to try hard not to feel pity for him, because she knew he wouldn’t want her to. It made her heart feel a strange ache, though, something she couldn’t name.

“Favorite food?” she asked.

“Wings and ale,” they said together and laughed.

The smiles died on their faces as they approached Fale’s apartment and the door was ajar.

“Did we leave it open?” she asked hopefully.

“No.” He stepped in front of her. Keron pushed the door open with his stainless-steel arm and scanned the room. Cushions were ripped off the couch and sliced open, tables upended and drawers pulled out, but everything was empty. The scene was identical in the kitchen, bath, and bedroom. Everything stood open and exposed; whoever had been there had definitely been looking for something. Fale’s luggage had been rifled through and someone had dumped out her belongings. The part that frightened Fale most was they knew where she was, which meant she was no longer ahead of the game. Who could have done this? What did they know?

## CHAPTER 5

Fale numbly packed her things as Keron righted furniture and picked up. Fale was shaking as she worked.

“Hey, you okay?” Keron’s concern was written in the lines on his forehead.

“How soon do you think they’ll be back?” she asked.

“Don’t think they found what they were looking for. I don’t know.” He was obviously not helping to reassure her. “Pack up as fast as you can. We’ll terminate your lease.”

When they were finished, she checked out at the front desk, telling the proprietress about the incident.

“Well, I did give a gentleman your apartment number, but I’m sure you are mistaken,” said Mrs. Paramor in a black and white hounds-tooth jacket. “We don’t have break-ins at our complex.”

“I’d like my credits back all the same,” Fale insisted. Keron held her large luggage as she scanned her wristband.

Mrs. Paramor pursed her lips, “I’ll need your forwarding address.”

“I don’t have one,” Fale admitted. Heat raced up her neck into her cheeks.

The older woman looked Keron up and down. “I’ll need someone’s address, in case we need to get a hold of you.”

“You won’t.” He stepped forward imposingly, his voice deep and loud.

“Fine,” Mrs. Paramor said flatly, punching numbers into a keypad. “But that forfeits any deposit.”

“I didn’t make one.” Fale swiped her wristband again, hoisted the rest of her bags, then held the door for Keron as they stepped into the sunshine.

Their walk was somber as they considered the implications of Fale's apartment break-in. He continued to scout the areas ahead of her and she wondered how she had gained enemies so quickly, and how they knew where to find her. Most of all, she wanted to know *why*? Fale couldn't comprehend what they wanted and why they would attack her for a key she had never even appreciated as more than a gift from her father. At Keron's apartment, they looked at each other worriedly before turning the knob, but everything was just where he'd left it. All over the place. She began to chuckle.

"What?" he laughed.

"I can't tell if you've been ransacked or not," she snickered.

"Are you kidding?" Keron teased. "This little piece of Heaven? It's not a mess, it's art."

Fale pushed a pile of towels with her foot. "Uh huh." She beamed at him and he took a step toward her, his gaze centered on her mouth. She breathed deep, took a step forward, and tripped over something on the floor. She fell face first into his chest, he caught her and roared with laughter as she scowled at him.

*Damn.*

"Gotta get back to work." He held her up by her forearms and pushed her upright. "I'll be back around seven. Make yourself at home."

"I'm going to Lisle's and to teach my class at the TacTrac, then I'll meet you back here." She pushed her things to the other side of the couch, since she assumed it was where she'd be sleeping. "I'll see you later," she said.

"You teach? Thought you were a student?"

"I am, but growing up as part of the TacTrac requires me to give back. Plus, I want to honor Nelson for everything he's done for me. Since he owns the TacTrac, working there makes

me feel like I'm helping pull my weight. It's also how I make my income. I have a class of nine-year-olds called the Tigers. It helps me master my patience and understanding of basic techniques." She toed the carpet and looked over his shoulder.

"Sounds really cool. It could be fun."

"It usually is. I'll tell you more about it later, if you want."

"Sure, we'll talk later," he said. "Oh Fale?"

"Yeah?"

"You look nice today. Real grownup, Sprout." He dimpled as he smiled brightly and winked.

*He noticed.*

"Lisle, it's Fale, open up." She knocked on his door knowing he'd never open it unless he knew who it was. Lisle was not only generally paranoid, he was afraid of the government, in particular. The locks clicked open like popping knuckles.

"Fale?"

"Yeah, it's me."

Lisle was a wizard, but he didn't wear a cape. Just a light blue button up, opened to show his t-shirt and hemp necklace. Beneath brown twill pants peeked bare feet. "I've got a funny reading about you. Very strong." Fale had known Lisle since she was a child. He was studying science at the University, but most of his time was devoted to practicing magic spells. He had begun training two years ago with the local group of wizards.

"You've done readings on me? Why? I didn't ask you to." Fale's head cocked to the side. She almost felt like her privacy had been invaded, but this wasn't anyone, it was Lisle. She

relaxed.

“It was an assignment from my council leader; to consult the crystals, interpreting the future of all my friends and make a report. I hope you don’t mind.” Lisle shut the door, absently flicking the deadbolts.

“It’s weird.” Fale stepped inside. “But I’m not mad.”

“The assignment was to practice; it was what I got on you that was weird.” He crossed his arms, taking up half the space in his small entryway.

Fale was instantly intrigued. Something strange was definitely happening to her, but she didn’t know if she believed in reading the future or all Lisle’s spiritual mumbo-jumbo. “Do tell,” she said excitedly.

Lisle ushered her in and offered Fale a seat with his hand. Then he asked, “Would you like tea?”

“Sure.” Waiting impatiently for his revelation, she bounced her knee hastily. “Thank you.”

Within a minute, Lisle handed her oolong tea with two sugars, the way she liked it, and Fale blew on it before taking a sip. Tea always calmed her nerves. Some kind of backwards chemical reaction to caffeine.

“When did you receive the gift of Sight?” Lisle asked unexpectedly.

Fale spit her tea all over the pillow next to her. “I’m sorry. Um, I didn’t anticipate that question. Why do you ask, Lisle?”

“I told you. I read it. You do have the gift, right?” Lisle leaned forward in his chair, careful to catch her every word.

“How could you know? I only found out yesterday. This was your assignment? And now your council of wizards know about this?” Fale felt panicky. How many people knew her secrets? Could any good come of this? She refocused, wizards only played at magic, right? This



was *Lisle*.

“Yes, my leader knows, but what does it have to do with anything?”

“Probably nothing, but I don’t know who to trust. The visions started when I turned 18 and now they feel stronger. At first, they were feelings, then conversations, now scenes of events have started to come true.” Fale set her tea down and stared Lisle in the eye.

“Wow. You’re stronger than I thought then. From what the books said, you shouldn’t be this far along yet.”

“Lisle, you’re talking in riddles.” She gave a slight shake of her head. Was there a book on Sight? Of course, there must be, there couldn’t be a book on *her*.

“Sorry,” he said, adjusting the height of his black metal framed glasses. “I get excited when I encounter something so unusual.”

“Thanks,” Fale said dryly, but Lisle didn’t catch her sarcasm.

“You’re welcome. What did you come over for? Did you need something?” Lisle’s friendly smile marginally relaxed Fale. He ran a hand through his shock of uncombed blond hair.

“I wanted to tell you about these visions I’m having-“

“The gift of Sight.”

“Yes, Sight. And ask you what you know about it? What it means? Why me?”

“That’s easy. First, the definition of the gift of Sight:” Lisle picked up a book nearby and slid his finger along the text. “Upon a predestined time, the bearer will receive dreams, trances, visions of true events for the purpose of fulfilling a destiny and/or righting a wrong.” He put the book down. “Second, what it means? You have a purpose to fulfill or a wrong to make right. And third, why you? Because you hold a great power- I saw it, I can feel it, but it’s dormant, I guess. Wow, it’s big, though.”

“Are you being serious right now? I can’t tell.” Fale narrowed her eyes at Lisle who blew his breath out like a blustering horse.

“Of course I’m serious. I’m always serious.”

“Who else would know my visions, Lisle?”

“No one. They belong to you. Unless,” he paused. “Hmmm.”

“Unless what?” Fale pushed. She was sitting so far forward; her knees were touching the coffee table. Lisle’s train of thought was often dizzying to follow, so she didn’t want him to get too lost in his thoughts or she’d never catch up.

“I guess some serious black magic could be used to break the rules, but nobody around here has enough power individually.”

“What about a secret group? Nelson said my father met with a secret group that may have had something to do with his death...”

“It’s possible, but no one else would want to know what you’re seeing. It’s all personal information regarding you. Not that you aren’t fascinating.” Lisle’s cheeks were scarlet.

“Lisle, I know someone sees my visions. I changed the outcome of one and it saved Keron’s life. Now someone is after me. I had to change a vision this morning to escape a kidnapper, and my apartment was ransacked. I can feel the danger I’m in, and I’m afraid whoever knows my visions is one step ahead of me. I’m worried if I don’t change every vision now, my own life’s future could be unstable.”

“Fale, are you safe now?”

“I hope so. I’m staying at a friend’s tonight, and Nelson gave me some info on an object they seem to be after.”

“I thought you implied they were after you.”

“I’m not sure what they want.” Fale shrugged.

“What are these ‘secret people’ coming for?” Lisle held up his fingers in air quotes.

“A key I have.” Fale spread her hands. “I think.” She slumped back against the seat and sighed.

“Must be special. What else can you tell me about it?”

“I don’t know much yet about how it is important. All I know is my father gave it to me, and it means my life.” She didn’t want to tell Lisle too much about the key, in case his leader asked him any more questions. Her father had said it was her destiny. Had he had a vision of this? Could all this running away be the pointless destiny she had thought would be so important one day? What a cruel joke that would be.

“I can run it by my council leader if you want, and see if he has any more in depth readings for you.”

“Do you trust him?” she asked.

“Yes,” he nodded.

“I don’t know about this, Lisle. I guess you can.”

“Do you know what it goes to?” he asked.

“I have an idea, but it isn’t solid,” Fale said. “I took some notes from Nelson’s books on old lore and the key might go to an important machine, but it’s about that vague. It’s called the Key of Effailya.”

“Sorry, I’ve never heard of it.” Lisle shook his head slowly, pouring himself another cup of tea. “But I haven’t read all the sacred history yet. Maybe I should start?”

“Can *you* get the gift of Sight and find out what’s going on?” Fale asked.

“No,” Lisle cleared his throat. “It’s a different kind of magic. Wizardry is conjured by

mortals in spells and readings, etcetera. It's a darker magic in color. The gift of Sight comes from natural magic; it's passed down from parent to child. Did your father have it? Do you know?"

"Nelson said he did." Fale nodded. She sipped her tea and leaned forward in the plush purple chair, Lisle's deep violet curtains throwing patterns over the coffee table. His apartment was dim and lit with glowing orbs of all colors and sizes. Lisle was a collector of antique orbs.

"Perfect, then we know its origin. Did he practice any other types of magic?" Lisle asked.

"I wouldn't know," Fale said dejectedly. "He kept so much from me."

"It seems to me like he was protecting you from something," Lisle offered.

"How can I fight what I don't know?" Fale lamented, finishing her tea.

"Let me read your leaves," he said, reaching for her hand. Fale handed Lisle the cup and felt it tip out of her grip as her vision warbled.

It was at that moment, she plunged gracefully into a trance. It felt like traveling through water, being weightless, but warm and tingly. She let go of the teacup and it was as if she let go of her body, floating like a balloon. Everything went black.

Suddenly she was outside in a very real storm, covering her head from the rain, and running with a little girl toward shelter.

*Where am I?*

The humidity was stifling and the rain pelted down against her skin like tiny shards of ice. A robot stepped before her. No, not completely a machine. A fully metal bodied man with a fleshy human face and what looked to be a bloody heart encased in thick glass in its chest. He stepped in front of her and grabbed her by her short hair as she slid to a halt.

*Since when do I have short hair?*

"Where do you think you're going? Get back to work! You aren't metal, the rain won't

rust you.” The guard threw her on the ground into the slimy mud that soaked her rough cotton pants.

The guard pulled out a baton and raised his arm. “I said, get back to work!”

He cracked the baton against her head and Fale saw stars dancing in a midnight sky. He was about to strike her again when the young girl next to her raised both hands and shouted, “Go away.”

Fale’s mouth dropped open in shock as he did what the little girl said, and widened her eyes looking upon the girl with curious admiration. *How is this possible?* The girl looked deep into Fale’s eyes and said, “You’re not my brother. Who are you? Get out.”

Fale was instantly pulled back into Lisle’s living area. “That was interesting,” he said in the greatest understatement in the history of Algea. The magazines, candles, side table and pillows around Fale had been thrown askew.

“What was?” Fale asked, looking around.

“Meeting the young man who just astral projected into your body, I assume.” He was bouncing with excitement.

“In layman’s terms, Lisle.”

“It appears you switched places,” he said. “You entered his head wherever he lives, and he was here in your body.”

“Oh, geez. It’s not even possible. Now I’m switching places with a boy? How does this all tie together? I’ve never been to that place Lisle; I was in a grassy field. Real grass everywhere, not potted plants, I’ve never seen anything like it outside of books. And there were completely metal men; one was going to hit me but a little girl made him go away. Then she... pushed me out. She said I was her brother. Actually, she could tell I was *not* her brother. What kind of magic did you do to me?” Fale held her head and posted her elbows on her knees.

“It wasn’t me, for sure. I had no idea what was happening. It scared the bejeebers out of the boy, too. I don’t think he’s used to indoor lighting.” Lisle smiled to himself and his deep brown eyes crinkled at the corners. “Quite a few rude accusations, I must say. His speech was accented and he didn’t appreciate being in your body. I would like to see it again.”

“I wouldn’t,” Fale nearly yelled at him. “I didn’t like being projected into his body, any more than he did mine. How can I stop this from happening again?”

“I can only guess it was because you weren’t in control of your thoughts and the magic took over,” Lisle suggested. “Keep your focus strong and don’t let your mind wander or you may slide into whatever connection you have with this person. I can’t figure out... You said a grassy field?” Fale nodded. “No indoor electricity.” Lisle thought out loud.

“I saw lots of huts, and I heard animals; like the Stockyards, but there are no small cities outside of there. Where could he be from?” Fale asked.

Lisle grasped his chin between his thumb and forefinger. “I can’t think of anywhere on Algea that fits all of those qualities at the same time. Even Harvest Region has electricity, and not much space for empty fields, though it is spring. We would have heard of a nomad tribe with metal men, wouldn’t we? Maybe one of the Islands?”

“I’m sure somewhere fits the description. But this was lush summer grass, Lisle. And the air was stifling, even though it was raining.”

“Hmmm.”

“Have I stumped you finally?” she laughed. “Point one for me.”

“If it wasn’t the season we’re in...” She nodded for him to go on. “And you’re sure?” Fale’s eyebrows lifted and she tilted her head as if to say *really?* “Then it was probably another... hasn’t been done in centuries...” Lisle’s cat bound up on his lap and Fale jumped.

“Another what?” Fale asked impatiently.

“Huh?” Lisle lost his train of thought. “Oh, in the Crion language we call it a dimetiri, but I don’t know if that’s it at all. It’s another dimension, or plane of existence. I’ll look into it for you, if I have the time. I have a lot of extra work lately, but since it has involved fortune telling for my friends, it’s not too bad.”

“What’s the Crion language?” she asked.

“Someone wasn’t paying attention in history lectures,” Lisle chastised. “The language is pre-Algean, dating back to the archaic times. It’s widely used in spell books.”

Fale smoothed her now rumpled pants and stood, laughing lightly. “Thanks for all your help, Lisle, and the tea and *history*, but I really need to go. I have a class to train at the TacTrac tonight. By the way, what did my leaves say?”

“The colors are dark and I saw the shape of a dog...it means loyalty,” Lisle said. Fale smiled, thinking of Keron. Lisle picked up her cup, squinted and turned it clockwise in his palm. “And definitely a raven. That stands for some really bad fortune, friend.” Lisle looked over his glasses at her and rose to his full six feet of slender height.

Fale hugged him. “Oh, great.”

“Sorry I wasn’t more help, Fale.”

“It’s all right. At least I was with you when I astra-what?”

“Astral projected.” He swept Fale’s hair over her shoulder with the back of his hand.

“Oh yeah, see you, Lisle,” she said. “If you need me, send word by the TacTrac.”

“Okay. And I’m always here if you need me.” Lisle walked her out and closed the door. Fale stepped out of the alley to stand in the late afternoon sun. Her body shook with trepidation. What would Keron think if a boy suddenly popped up in her body? *Could this new guy adapt to my world?* Fale knew he wouldn’t be able to teach her classes or anything, but maybe he could learn to not freak out if it happened again. How would it be possible without having Lisle there

to explain what was happening? She didn't know what was occurring herself. Her anxiety was building with each heartbeat.

Fale was nearly to the TacTrac when she heard Izzy. "Hey Fale." Izzy fell into step with her on the street.

"Hey Iz. How's it going tonight?"

"Not bad. You got the Tigers' class?"

"Yeah. They're fun."

"Better you than me." Izzy flashed a bright smile. "Don't forget, tonight's the fundraiser. What are you doing after?"

"Ah, going to Keron's." Fale hesitated, pausing her steps in uncertainty. How much should she reveal?

"Reeeally." Izzy's smile grew wider. "Do tell."

"It's nothing, really. My place got broken into-"

Izzy looked taken aback. "Number one, why am I only now hearing about this? And two, why did you go to Keron and not me?" She pouted with arms akimbo.

"Sheesh Izzy. I just now saw you, and Keron was with me when it happened."

"You sure are spending a lot of time with a guy who calls you 'squirt' like you're five years old. I hope you don't get attached again," Izzy said.

"It's Sprout, and I'm not. My head is in the game."

*Sort of.*

"Oh yeah, Sprout. Like that's better." Izzy rolled her eyes.



“He hasn’t called me Sprout since... well, the last couple of days,” Fale defended him.

“Yeah. You’re eighteen and can drink at the pub now,” Izzy sneered.

“What does that have to do with anything? Iz, I can’t have this conversation right now. I’m gonna be late.”

Fale ignored Izzy’s dark look of incredulity at being blown off and hiked her bag onto her shoulder. She hurried to her locker, changed, and spent the next few hours working with a class of young girls. *Focus, Fale*, she continued her mantra, emphasizing fluid movements and letting go of the stress she felt building like a tide coming in. Her life was becoming a puzzle, and she was missing pieces.

Since she had skipped her own challenging routine, she felt like she still had more energy to burn. Fale decided to forgo her usual shower. She left on her form fitting black capri length pants, tank top, and soft black leather slip on shoes. When she took her bag off the peg, a piece of paper floated to the floor. It was a note from Izzy, “Sorry. I want you to have fun, but be careful. Heart you. Lunch tomorrow? Our pub at noon. –Iz”

Fale smiled, tucked the note in her bag and threw it across her body. She tightened the strap as far as it would go and began to run toward Keron’s apartment. She pumped her arms and imagined the grassy field from her vision, no, projection. Perspiration beaded on her skin as Fale’s muscles pushed past the burn, and she picked up speed. She flew like a star shooting across the night sky. She reached Keron’s building at ten ‘til seven, and she decided to stretch. Her body thrummed with dopamine and Fale pulled her limbs taut. She was in a squat with one leg out straight, toes up, when Keron’s voice resounded in the stairwell.

“You run here from the TacTrac in that?” He gestured to her outfit, sounding slightly impressed.

“Yep,” she confirmed. “And spare me the ‘predator lecture.’ I can take care of myself.” She smiled and flexed a bicep.

“I brought dinner.” He gave up on chastising her and held up a brown handled sack. “There’s not much food in the apartment.”

“Good. I’m famished.” She breathed deep, standing and jumping lightly.

Keron’s eyes took her in from her ponytail to her shoes in open appreciation. Fale’s cheeks turned pink and she lowered her lashes. She wasn’t used to so much attention. She had always worn flowy shapeless clothing, but her workout gear left little to the imagination. Keron opened the door, saw her embarrassment, and chuckled, “Come on, Sprout. Let’s eat.” She felt better about the undesirable nickname this time.

Fale showered first in Keron’s gray-themed bathroom. The tub was tiled in tiny gray and white checkered squares and the vanity was made of white marble with veins of gray and silver. It had been furnished with a soft charcoal colored rug on the lighter shaded linoleum floor and four matching dark gray towels. Keron had his personal items laying out, but Fale used her own supplies and repacked them, not knowing what the next plan would be. She instantly felt anxiety about her situation. Where should she go now? Should she get another apartment? How long could they stay here before she put Keron in real danger? Fale put on large boxers, her University t-shirt, rolled up her hair, clipped it, on her way to the kitchen. Keron had laid out a fresh salad for her. “Thought you’d like something healthy.”

“I would, thanks.” She accepted the bowl and dug in. She was glad she hadn’t involved Control in her problems because then little things, like buying a salad and hiding, would suddenly become complicated. “I have to hurry. I’m meeting Izzy and Lisle for a Society fundraiser.”

“Cool. What did you end up doing this afternoon?” he asked.

“I went to Lisle’s. Man, it was strange. He knew everything already,” she punctuated her words by making little circles in the air with her fork. She still wasn’t sure how she felt about Lisle knowing so much. She didn’t understand magic and it made her uneasy.

“No kidding?”

“I guess not everything, but the whole vision business, anyway. He’s going to ask his council about my dad’s secret group and who might know about my visions.” She punctuated her sentence by stabbing her salad.

“Is that a good idea?”

“What?” she asked.

“What if it’s them?” He crossed his arms on the table.

“It wouldn’t be them. They already know. Lisle told them.” Fale was concerned about Lisle’s council knowing her secrets too, but there wasn’t anything she could do about it. He’d already told them. Part of her Takanori training was learning to let go of what she could not change, so she shrugged off the nagging worry and ate. She trusted Lisle, and there was no way he’d be involved with someone who wanted to harm her.

“Still makes me nervous, involving people we don’t know. People who do magic.” Keron said “magic” like it was a dirty word. He chewed his salad, scraping the bottom of his bowl. “Guess it’s my turn in the shower,” he said, pulling his t-shirt off from the back of its neck.

Fale looked away before the sight of his sculptured stomach could make her drop her fork. *Geez, Fale, get a grip.* They obviously did outside work shirtless, because his tan was perfect with a smattering of freckles covering his smooth chest. Keron tucked his shirt under his arm and gulped down his iced tea before going.

*Go already.*

While Keron was in the shower, Fale finished her salad and cleared away their trash, wiping the table. She knocked on the bathroom door and told Keron she was leaving, but they could talk over her notes when she got back.

She ran to Izzy’s apartment, her wet hair slapping against her back. She rapped on the

door, then flung it open. “Sorry I’m late.”

“Again.”

Fale winced. “You still have my dress?”

“No, I gave it to the little fantocci’s. Of *course* I have your dress. Hurry and put it on, Lisle will be here any time now.” Izzy smoothed down her ocean blue gown, embellished with crystals and little teardrop earrings. Fale felt like a girl standing next to a woman, in her powder pink dress with the tiniest little straps. She ran her hands through her hair a few times and put on some lip gloss.

“This is as good as you’re gonna get,” Fale said unapologetically.

The knock on the door, took them both by surprise. “You guys ready?” Lisle called from outside the door. Each girl took one of Lisle’s arms and they walked to the gold-gilded ballroom at the University, used for high-class functions. The poster by the open double doors read: Project Omnia.

“What does it mean?” Fale asked.

“Omnia can mean thoroughly or wholly, but I don’t know what it has to do with a fundraiser for families of fantocci? Maybe taking care of the whole family?” Lisle volunteered.

“It means we’re at the right place,” Izzy said and wandered off to mingle.

Fale clung to Lisle’s arm. “I don’t like strange places,” she whispered.

“Me either,” Lisle agreed, covering her hand, looped into the crease of his elbow.

“Let’s mingle, I guess. Those must be the families up front.” Fale tried not to point.

“Do you want to go meet them?”

“Maybe later. Let them eat. They all look starving.” Fale looked away.

“They could have at least given them some nicer clothes to wear,” Lisle was disgusted.

“They don’t look bad for…” Fale tried to think of the right word.

“Were you going to say poor people?”

“No,” Fale was defensive. “I wasn’t.”

“Yes, you were.” He poked her with his bony shoulder.

“I was not.” She took her hand back and crossed her arms. He chuckled.

“I was kidding. There are some seats over there.” Lisle guided her around the room.

“Does it seem like people are watching us? There are a lot of Control here.”

“Of course, there are. This is put on by Control- trying to show they aren’t victimizing people because they help the families of the people they steal.”

“Ssshhh,” Fale whispered. “Do you want to lose your place at school and find yourself back at home with jobless parents?”

“I’m not afraid of them,” Lisle said.

“You should be. Oh look, there’re Izzy’s parents. I love her dress.”

“They are living off the fantocci’s money.”

“How so?”

“You don’t really think the fantocci money goes back to the taxpayers, do you? Come on, Fale, get your head out of the clouds. They pay for things like Izzy’s dance lessons.”

“That’s heresy,” she whispered.

“I know.” Lisle grinned. “But Izzy’s a good person, and she means well, so surely some of these people really care about the families.”

“I hope so. There, the guy in the vest, he’s passed us three times. Don’t you think it’s strange?”

“A little excessive maybe, but you can’t fault a guy for lookin’. You do look nice tonight.”  
He took her hand again and laid it on his arm.

“Thanks Lisle. It’s Izzy’s old dress. But it’s not what I mean... They keep looking over here. And don’t tell me it’s because I look fabulous.”

“Okay, okay. I’ll keep my eyes open.”

They walked the periphery of the room. Tables in blue cloth covered at least twenty round tables, conducive to chattering and check writing. The food was thirty dollars a plate and Izzy’s parents had paid for them. All in the name of charity. Bright gold and white streamers hung from gilded light fixtures on the ballroom wall and the big windows on the front of the room were propped open for the cool spring breeze to ruffle skirts here and there. Fale couldn’t find a purpose to the seating, everyone mingled. The men stood leaning over chairs to talk to seated couples. Women waved paper fans. Fale noticed men speaking quietly to one another, then staring at her and Lisle. Was it because they were some of the very few young people present? She was getting uncomfortable, and it was not just because she dreaded sitting through the upcoming presentation. She looked to her seat at one of the front tables, searching for Izzy, and saw a waiter replacing her water glass. Why would he do that? It was already full.

“Do you think Izzy would mind if I left early?” Fale asked Lisle, but he was too preoccupied to notice.

“Lisle.” She nudged him.

“Huh? What?”

“Do you think Izzy would mind if I left?”

“You know, I think those guys are watching you. Us. I don’t know.” Lisle steered her toward the door, looking backward.

“Lisle, what are you-?”

Pulling her elbow, he strode through the double doors, into the hall, and watched two men follow them out. Lisle picked up the pace.

“Lisle, I’m about to lose my shoes. What are you doing?”

“Look behind us and see if you recognize anyone.”

Fale twisted around and saw the two men. “It’s the man in the vest,” she said.

“I know.”

She grabbed his hand and pulled him down the stairs. “Run, Lisle!”

They ran down the last few stairs and across the courtyard of the University. They looked over their shoulders to see the men gain speed. “What do we do?” Lisle asked.

“Well, we can’t go to Control. Let’s go to the pub and sneak out the back door,” Fale tried to talk quietly.

“Huh?”

“Follow me,” she shouted.

Fale took the lead and ran for the mall. With any luck, they could lose them in the crowd there. They darted between lovesick college students enjoying the evening and boys playing a concert of dueling guitars for prospective girlfriends. They passed the occasional drunken youngster, stumbling and sloshing liquid from plastic cups, and pushed one in order to slow down the men. A riot of curses followed them into the street and to the pub. They could see the men tracking them through the window.

Fale yelled to the bartender looking around wildly, “We’re being followed by two grown men. Can you get us outta here?”

The bartender, a young man with tangled blond hair, bouncing wildly around his head, nodded at them. “Under here, stay low.” He motioned under a strip of the bar that was open to

the other side. “Cleo, you’re up!” he yelled to the girl sitting with her leaf rolled tobacco, smoking.

“Got ya.” She winked at them over a pair of round glasses with orange lenses, and stepped up to the front of the bar.

“This way, they’re comin’ through the door.” He kept his hand on Fale’s back and Lisle crouched as they stepped quickly behind the bartender. They sprinted for the kitchen.

“What can I do for ya?” They heard Cleo yell over the band.

The bartender rushed them past the open stove and the sinks to an ice machine wedged against an old back door.

“How are we gonna get out?” Fale despaired.

“Easy. Cleo will keep ‘em up there as long as she can. You two git out here and go straight back. Toward the pool. There’s no windows on this side of the buildin’. They’ll have to go ‘round the front to get out and you’ll be long gone.”

Fale was stepping lightly from one foot to the other in impatience as the young man pulled out the ice machine and unlatched the door. They had to squeeze through the door and between the brick wall and the big gray dumpster parked behind it. The door squeaked shut as Fale and Lisle cleared the side of the building. Lisle laughed, but Fale hushed him until they were past the first apartment building.

“Woohoo. I feel so alive. What’s next?” Lisle spun in a circle, but Fale was feeling like she’d gotten away too easily.

“Next, you go home. I need to think.”

“What about?” Lisle looked at her pale face. “Fale? This wasn’t a coincidence, was it?”

“No, but I don’t know what’s going on. Someone is after me and I don’t know why. They ransacked my apartment today,” Fale said. “Keep walking.”



“Why didn’t you tell me about this?”

“I had Keron with me, I’m okay.” Fale rolled her eyes.

“Where are you staying? Do you need to come home with me?”

“No, I’m staying with Keron. He’s expecting me.”

Lisle narrowed his eyes, but he nodded. “Keron’s a good guy. And he can fight. He’ll protect you.”

“I can protect myself, but thanks Lisle. Go home. I’ll talk to you soon.”

“All right, but don’t leave me wondering too long.”

“I won’t.” She hugged him briefly and turned to go to Keron’s.

“And they snuck you out the back?” Keron was in the kitchen wearing only a pair of gray lounge pants, and Fale was pacing in the living room.

“Actually, they snuck us out the kitchen door.”

“They don’t have a kitchen door.” Keron finished wiping the counter and tossed the rag in the sink, joining her.

“I didn’t think so, either. That’s the beauty of it.”

“Well, you’re safe now. Stop pacing, you’re making me nervous.” Keron sat on the couch and patted the seat next to him.

“That’s just it, how do we know we’re safe here?”

“No one followed us here last night. My place didn’t get broken into today and nobody followed you here tonight. I think we’re good.”

She walked in front of him. “Let’s keep our bags packed, in case we have to run, okay?”

“Sounds okay to me. I’ll pack mine in a little bit and you are already packed, so seriously,

stop wearing holes in my carpet.”

She laughed. “I’m still agitated, I guess.”

“So, tell me about your notes from today. Maybe there are some clues as to who’s following us. Anybody could have been at the fundraiser. Were the men after you wearing uniforms?”

She walked to her bag and dug out the notecards. “No, but most of the officers weren’t wearing uniforms. So, we can’t assume anything.”

She took her cards to the couch and sat back into the crushed leather so dark, Fale didn’t know if it was navy or black.

“Wanna drink?”

“Sure.” She nodded, tucking her feet underneath her.

He came back with two bottles, switched on the side lamp and sat next to Fale, handing one to her. *Don’t you have a shirt? Why does he make it so hard to focus? C’mon Fale, focus.*

“So what’cha got?” He sat too close for her to breathe.

“These are notes from the books Nelson loaned me.” She pulled out three sets of notecards and he looked over her shoulder. “I guess the legends about Effailya were pretty well known back in her day, but now they’re all hidden by Control. We’re lucky Nelson found these rare books.”

“I’d heard of the key in the Underground, but I don’t know much about the princess. What’d you find?”

“These are the abbreviated notes. Source one,” she began, clearing her throat. “The legend of Effailya states ‘the princess and her people were sent far, far away to a place only reached by a mechanism.’ Whatever that means. ‘The princess will reappear in Algea to rescue her people when the time comes, with the Key of Eff...’”

“The Key of Eff?”

“Well, the paper was ripped, so that’s all it said. It meant the Key of Effailya, I’m sure.”

He laughed. “I kinda like the key of Eff- like the letter F, we can use it. Maybe no one listening to us will make the correlation.”

She laughed. “Source two. ‘Key of F: Princess Effailya lost a political battle and was banished by the Source Wizard Gryndoll to Garrith, where her people still reside in isolation.’”

“Where’s Garrith?” he asked.

“I have no idea. I’ve never heard of it before.” Fale looked at Keron.

“Keep going,” he said, taking a drink, “I’m listening.”

“Source three: ‘Once upon a time, there was a princess of mages named Effailya, who loved science. She was beautiful, and enraptured a wizard named Gryndoll. Together they-“

“Is this a long story?” Keron yawned.

“Kind of,” Fale admitted.

“Can we go to the part about the key? I’m about to fall asleep.”

“Sure. Me too,” she said. “Let me see. ‘Some say princess Effailya found the key to the machine, but her people remain in Garrith. No one knows what happened to the key.’”

*We do.*

“Hmmm.” Keron drank again. “So basically, the key goes to a machine?”

“It goes to the machine that will save Princess Effailya’s subjects.” Fale answered. “Source one said you can only get to the place they’re in with the machine.”

“Let me get this straight... an evil wizard named Gryndoll fell in love with Princess Effailya and when he couldn’t have her, he banished her and all her people to another place called Garrith? And your key goes to a machine to free all the descendants of those people, still

stuck there, right?"

"Right." She nodded.

"How does a machine set people free?"

"Maybe it helps them travel somehow?" Fale guessed.

"Who's holding the people there, now that Gryndoll's dead?" Keron asked.

"It has to be his great, great, great grandson, Gasten. At least, it's what I think, but I'm not sure. Gasten is the Source Wizard now, and lives with the village of wizards in the forest outside the city. They are the ones North and West of the castle base." She sighed heavily. "I wish I knew who was having my visions, and what this key means for me. Am I supposed to deliver it to someone? Who has the machine? Could it be these wizards?"

"And who else wants the key?" Keron asked.

"Whoever it is doesn't seem very nice. It can't be the wizards. Lisle's a wizard and they're good guys. He vouches for them. Maybe someone who doesn't want us helping rescue Princess Effailya's people?" Fale thought for a second. "That would go against Control, trying to hide the past, if Effailya's subjects simply reappear."

"But what does it have to do with us? We aren't rescuing anyone. And what's this machine?"

"Beats me." Fale gulped her fruited drink. "I'm glad to have at least one clue."

"Guess so." Keron relented. "Hey, do you want the couch or the bed?"

"I'll take your couch," she said.

"You'd be more comfortable in the bed," he offered.

"I couldn't."

*But I'm tempted.*

“Okay, if you’re sure?”

Fale smiled and nodded, tossing back the rest of her drink.

“I’ll get you some blankets and be right back,” he sauntered out of the room, pants slung low on his hips.

Fale put her notecards back in the pocket inside her bag in case she needed them again.

“Got ‘em.” Keron put a pillow on the couch. “Lay down,” he said.

Fale obeyed. Keron went around turning off lights, but left the lamp on. He lay the blankets over Fale and tucked them in around her body. “Comfy?” he asked.

“Mmm hmm,” she murmured.

Keron leaned down and gently kissed the cut on her forehead. His lips were warm and dry, but smooth. He smelled like his soap, and minty toothpaste, and a heady warm scent that was all Keron.

Fale sighed. “Goodnight.”

He chuckled, turning off the light. “G’night, Sprout.”

“I sprouted, you know,” she said, feeling brave in the dark.

“Yeah,” he said quietly. “I know.”

“Remind me to tell you what else happened at Lisle’s.”

“What *did* happen at Lisle’s?”

“I’ll tell you tomorrow, but it was strange.”

“Okay.” He touched her forehead and left.

“Don’t forget to pack a bag,” she called after him.

As Fale drifted out of consciousness, she thought she heard a voice in her mind telling her

to beware. She tried to shake it off as she slipped under the dark blanket of sleep.

*It can't get much stranger than this. Can it?*

## CHAPTER 6

The aroma of hot coffee and flatcakes woke Fale in the morning and she realized with pleasure it was Saturday. Fale stretched languidly, watching the dust motes playing in the rays of sunlight streaming through the front window, like children twirling on a playground.

Flatcakes were one of her favorite foods. Keron wouldn't know, but Nelson had made her apple flatcakes and chocolate flatcakes and a variety of types on Saturdays mornings when she was a child. Fale smiled to herself, enjoying the daydream.

"Good, you're up. What's got you so happy?" Keron stood in the kitchen doorway.

*You. You making me breakfast.*

"Coffee and flatcakes." It was her most frequently chosen breakfast combination of all time. It was the first meal Nelson had fed her when he brought her home to live with him, and every Saturday after. The poor man had no clue children didn't drink coffee and Fale liked it too much to tell him otherwise. Besides, he added powdered cream and sugar to hers.

"You guessed it," Keron said.

"That's an aroma I know well." She smiled radiantly.

"Man, there went a good surprise."

"Well, did you make them in a smiley face?" she teased.

"Be right back." He ducked out of the room, and Fale laughed joyfully. It was possible she was being hunted, yes, but she hadn't felt this happy in a long time. And it was all about a box of pancake mix. In fact, mixes were what they lived on. There was no fresh meat in Alloy City, or eggs, or milk. Everything came in powdered substitutes or dehydrated and frozen meals, but that was all they knew. The Industrial District, close enough to Harvest Region, recieved fresh fruits

and vegetables, thankfully, or they would be dehydrated, too.

The stockyards were in the southern most region of Algea. Very few people in Algea got fresh meat, but the militia of the Engineering Design District, living between the stockyards and Harvest were heard to be all-powerful. It was where most of the plans came from, for each sector in Algea. The sectors created products, but Engineering Design dreamed up all the new inventions and gave what was needed to each. It was a good thing the civil wars had been over for hundreds of years so power in one sector only strengthened all the others. Fale stared out the window at her city.

*What would life be like if all the cities took care of themselves?* She could imagine the power struggle over the best, richest and most beautiful cities. It was better this way. They all needed each other.

Fale knew as a Takanori warrior she would get to travel to other sectors to train and learn from famed warriors of all kinds. A harmony existed in sharing a craft with others. An intense worry sprouted in her at the thought of all of Algea's cities going to war with one another over a power struggle. To have to fight the warriors in those other cities rather than learn from them and commune in peace, it would be unthinkable. Fale stuffed the thought down.

“What’s on your mind?” Keron leaned against the door opening with two steaming mugs.

“Flatcake mix and civil war, this time.”

Keron walked over and set her coffee on the table. “How do those connect? Or is this ‘Fale Logic’ on a tangent?”

“Something like that.” She smiled and looked down at the mention of what he used to call ‘nonsensical thinking’ and thus termed ‘Fale Logic.’ It wasn’t her fault her mind ran off track.

“Just kidding, Fale. Don’t take it personally.” He bent down to look in her eyes and smiled gently. “Don’t have any flavored cream here, but I tried to make your coffee light brown with



milk.”

She took her mug in both hands, blew the steam, and drank. “Aah,” she moaned.

Keron put a hand on his heart and held his other hand out to her. “Wait’ll you taste my cooking.”

Fale laughed in spite of herself and took his hand, letting Keron lead her to the tiny kitchen table for two. She tugged her boxers as low to her knees as she could. Even though she tried to cover up, Fale felt nearly naked in her pajamas in Keron’s kitchen. It felt too familiar. Keron’s back was to her as he worked at the stove. She watched tendons pulling the muscles of his shoulders in little bunches, his valezsan arm moving effortlessly with the will of his body like water running over stones.

Fale felt herself floating like she did at Lisle’s and was overcome with terror.

*Not now. I can’t trade places with the boy while I’m with Keron. Get a grip, Fale. Focus!* She took her key and held it in her hand so tightly the edges nearly pierced her flesh. She closed her eyes and thought of the pain. Only the pain. *Focus.*

When Fale opened her eyes, Keron sat across from her; a pile of flatcakes between them, and a pancake with a chocolate smiley face on her plate. “Wanna tell me about that?” he pointed to her still shaking hand.

Fale dropped the key back under her shirt. “Not yet.” She looked everywhere but his eyes.

“Fair enough.” He frowned and forked three flatcakes off the stack.

“Thanks for my smiley, though.”

“Not a problem.” He clipped, his lips set into a thin line. Her attempted return to normalcy had fallen short. *Oh, he’s going to pout. Fine, be a baby.*

“What are you doing today?” she asked, taking a bite of her breakfast.

“Agency workout training.”

“Is there a fight soon?”

His face pinched. She could tell he was gauging how much to reveal. “There’s a fight tomorrow night, but you don’t know anything about it,” he said sternly. Keron had been forced into fighting in the underground for the Control Agency to contain him and his wild temper, but also as a way to win money by betting on him. As long as they controlled the fights, they were still the ruling body, even though underground fighting was officially illegal because of its deadliness.

“Do you have to?” she asked, trying not to whine.

“Yes Fale.” Keron stood up. “I’m the main freakin’ attraction.” He threw the batter bowl and spoon into the sink with a crash and put his hands on his head. As much as he enjoyed fighting, he hated being used by the Control Agency.

“But maybe you could stand up to them, maybe-”

“They own me, Fale. Don’t you get it? I don’t get to say where I go, what I do, who I hate, who I love-” He walked out of the kitchen into the bathroom and slammed the door. Fale heard the shower turn on. Could being fantocci have anything to do with why he had turned her down so long ago? No, he’d already told her she was too young and naïve. She sighed.

*Might as well eat.*

Keron emerged from the steamy bathroom level headed and wrapped in a towel. “Be dressed in a minute. You should wait about half an hour for hot water, though,” he said coldly. Fale ignored his off-handed behavior and drank her coffee. She had already cleaned up her dish and gotten out her clothes so she could change in the bathroom after her shower.

Keron sat in the chair opposite her and picked at his plate. “Sorry,” he grumbled.

“I hope you work it out this afternoon,” she said, looking away.

His expression darkened for a moment. “Are you coming back here tonight?”

“Do you want me to?”

“Dammit, Fale.” Keron took a deep breath, held it and expelled it slowly. “Sure. Yes. I said we were in this together.”

“Because I have to meet Izzy for lunch today, and I’m sure she’d put me up if I’m too much trouble.” Fale made it sound like a question.

*Please say no.*

“Would you be more comfortable with Iz?” he asked sincerely.

*Oh, no. Trick question. How do I answer without looking desperate?*

“Izzy doesn’t know what’s going on yet. And her studio is pretty small, I doubt we’d be comfortable on top of each other.”

“You haven’t told Izzy?”

“There’s never been a good time. She worries so much.” Fale didn’t want to endanger her friend, either, in whatever was going on. Keron had already been threatened, Lisle was being asked questions by his wizards, and she had involved Nelson herself. She had a childlike faith in Nelson’s invincibility, as many apprentices do after growing up with their mentor. She couldn’t imagine anything happening to him, he would live forever. And so would Izzy, if Fale had any say in the matter.

“What does she think of you staying here?” Keron asked.

“She knows we’re only friends...” She shrugged a shoulder.

“I see.” He smirked. “My reputation has just been ruined.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Izzy’s mouth. And the fact that I am now a cradle robber, to everyone we both know.”

Fale crossed her arms indignantly. Keron lowered his eyes to her rounded neckline and said, “Who knows, this might pay off. I’ve been in worse situations.” His meaning dawned on her.

Fairly steaming, Fale stood up so fast she dropped her pile of clean clothes and said, “Shut up. You don’t know what you’re talking about. Izzy wouldn’t do that. Would she?” She picked up her clothing while he watched her with the look of a hungry predator.

“Oh, she would,” he spat. Fale was uneasy as his eyes narrowed. Was he trying to bait her?

*What happened to the sweet Keron from earlier?*

Fale showered quickly because of the cold water, but she wasn’t going to spend another minute with him acting like that. She twisted her hair around the sides of her head and made a twisted bun as best she could. Her silk top was the exact olive shade as her eyes, minus the spiky ring of gold around her pupils. It was trimmed in a darker green velvet ribbon with a square neck. Her cheeks were pink and her lips full. Fale actually felt pretty as she looked into the mirror.

She found Keron waiting on the couch for her in the living room. He stood with his mouth open and held out Fale’s shoulder bag. She took it, hiding her smile. She loved seeing she could affect him, too. It made her feel powerful. Since the apartment would only open to Keron’s wristband, they would need to coordinate when they returned.

“What time will you be back?” she asked.

“I have to be there by ten and we’ll go to two. Then from three to six.”

“Two-a-days. Yuck. It’s what we call it at the TacTrac. Okay. Well, I can meet Izzy for an hour or so and go back to her place. I need to pick up a tincture; I’ll do it on the way back ‘cause they close at six. Then we should meet back here at the same time.”

"Didn't need the rundown, Fale, but thanks."

*Such a sour mood.*

"Hope you have a good day," she called as he went out the door.

"Girls," he muttered. Fale smothered another laugh behind her palm, as she followed him out. Keron made sure the deadbolt was locked behind them and took off for his training center while Fale began a brisk pace.

It was during her walk into the city center when Fale had another vision. People walked around her as she stood in one place, her gaze on things unseen. The pictures flashed through Fale's mind.

*She saw Lisle in his suit at a podium. A clock face spun horizontally as she stood in the middle and watched the sun travel across the sky. As it was beginning to lower in the west, the hands stopped at five o'clock. A picture of Lisle's superiors leaning forward in their seats as he pointed to an easel with her key drawn on it. Four robed wizards in bright colors gathering Lisle into their huddle, speaking into his ear, pointing, looking stern, then patting his back with fake smiles. Finally, the picture that stole Fale's breath; Lisle conflicted, sad, and yet proud, to hand Fale's key into the waiting hands of the wizards.*

The world came back into focus and Fale desperately tried to think of how to change the vision. *Stop the meeting? Not likely.* She decided to go to Lisle's.

"Lisle, it's Fale again. Open up." She knocked repeatedly on his white painted door.

He opened it a crack. "Is it you or the boy?"

"Lisle, don't be stupid. I'm not freaking out."

"Okay, okay, it's you." He unchained the door. "You're so rude to be so gifted."

“What are you-? Never mind. I had a vision involving you.”

“Me?” Lisle puffed up with importance.

“Yeah. When you meet with your leaders tonight, I want you to leave me out of it. All my information, except for what they already know.”

Lisle led Fale to his living room. “But the Source Wizard Gasten will be present and I have based my presentation on you because yours was the most interesting story.”

“Lisle, the vision says they will use you to get the key from me.”

“They wouldn’t do that,” Lisle protested as they both sat opposite each other.

“Maybe not normally, but if you pitch a whole presentation on me, won’t it make me interesting? I don’t know if this assignment was meant to dig for information or not, Lisle, but please change it. I can help you. We have six hours.”

“No. You go. I’ll fix it. I won’t tell anyone your problems except maybe the boy, if he comes back. Has he?”

“I think it almost happened this morning at the kitchen table.”

“What happened?” Lisle leaned forward.

“Nothing. I stopped it.”

“You...stopped it?” Lisle looked at her incredulously.

“Yeah, is there something wrong with that?”

“Only it’s supposed to be impossible for mortals.” Lisle leaned back and threw his hands up. “You have no idea how much natural power you have.”

“Really? So, tell me.” Fale was intrigued. What kind of power could she have? She was ordinary. Not a wizard at all. Only a girl, hiding an old key. She really wanted to know what this power stuff was about. Maybe she wouldn’t have to be fighting this feeling of fear around every

corner, if she had some control.

“Come back a week from now, when I don’t have to re-do a life-changing presentation. We’ll also experiment with calling your boy and communicating with him.”

“He’s not my boy. Sorry about the extra work, though.” Fale was frustrated that he totally ignored her question, but she let it go because she felt responsible for making him resolve her predicament.

“Will this keep you out of danger?”

“I hope so. Either it’ll help, or it will tick off whoever is looking for information. I don’t know who the source is, Lisle. I don’t know who all the bad guys are.” Everyone was beginning to look like a potential enemy. She creased her brow into worry lines.

“I’m a good guy.” Lisle looked at her hopefully. There was so much need in his expression. Need to be acknowledged, need to be accepted, need to be trusted. If Fale had to guess Lisle’s life goal, it would be to do magic on the side of good. There was no doubt in her mind, Lisle was one of the good guys.

“I know. I trust you, but I have to trust my visions and they say someone wants your knowledge.”

“I won’t tell, Fale, I promise.” Lisle gave her his best puppy dog look. She laughed.

“Thank you. I’ll let you work on your presentation.” Fale stood up. Lisle rose in front of her, reached to a shelf above her left shoulder and pulled a cloth bundle from a wooden box. He held it out to her.

“What’s that?” she asked.

“Please.” Lisle considered her bright eyes. “Don’t say no. Take this. I’ll feel much better. It’s enchanted to mortally wound anyone who attacks its owner. Only use it if you have to.”

“Lisle, I can’t...” She took the cloth from him.

“Please,” he interrupted her.

“...accept this,” she continued. “What if you need it?”

“I’ll enchant another one.” He grinned. He held a hand over hers and spoke the word, “Erus.”

“What did you do?”

“You are the owner now.”

Fale sighed and opened the cloth to find a shiny red leather sheath, six inches long with a glistening gold hilt sticking out. The leather had been stamped with a flying beast and words Fale didn’t know. The ornate strap was around two feet long in her estimation: a perfect length. Carefully she removed the blade and turned it over in her hand to feel its weight. The golden hilt was intricately designed with a rope-like handle and twin heads of the beast on the scabbard adorning the guard. The blade itself was perfectly symmetrical with a sinister edge. She felt the blade for flexibility.

“Titanium alloy?” she guessed.

“Grade five,” he confirmed proudly.

“It’s beautiful,” Fale breathed.

“It’s yours.”

“Turn around so I can put it on?”

Lisle looked confused for a moment, then blushed profusely as he caught her meaning. When he turned, Fale slid down her pants. She returned the dagger to its sheath and attached the strap’s golden buckle to her inner thigh so the blade rested directly under her right hand when standing. She slid her silk slacks easily over the thin sheath and let down her shirt to cover the top. Unless she was working out, it would be indiscernible. “How can I thank you?” Fale asked.



“Stay alive,” Lisle said quietly, turning around.

“Why do you seem so sad, Lisle?”

“It’s silly. Maybe I’ll tell you next week. Can you meet me, same day, same time?”

“Lisle, whatever it is, you can tell me,” she urged.

“It’s nothing. Really.”

“If you promise,” she said warily. “I need to go meet Izzy for lunch, but I feel so much better. Thanks again, Lisle.”

As she hugged him goodbye, Fale kissed his cheek. Lisle looked pained and Fale thought it was somehow her fault. He opened the door for her and she walked out into the darkening afternoon. Cloud cover rolled in as she hurried to the pub closest to the University where her group of friends frequently met for lunch.

Fale opened the door to a fog of smoke and a wall of sound. The live rock band played music on the corner stage. The lead singer held the mic with both hands and sweat pasted his hair in black spikes to his forehead. Fale was invigorated by the music and tapped her finger on her thigh to the beat. She loved the pub. All her friends hung out there in booths at the back. She felt safe among the friendly faces. She felt alive.

Stepping up to the bar, Fale asked for her favorite cocktail and scanned her wristband for payment. She thanked Cleo for helping her the night before and took her glass of lemon vodka twist. She walked the back booths until she found her friend, fending off attention from nearby tables. Fale laughed out loud. Izzy would have been stunning in any color, but her dark skin made her look exotic. Her eyes were almond shaped and almost always lined with dark shadows, her lips shining with pink gloss. Fale was more of a minimalist. Nelson hadn’t taught her about makeup and when you’re either studying, training or teaching, you don’t have time for it anyway. Besides, Nelson said she didn’t need it. He said when she trained, her face flushed and

she looked made up because of her dark features. He had called her pretty. Fale hoped so because she didn't have a clue how to be a real girl sometimes. Thank God for Izzy. "Hey," she said, sliding into the booth.

"What happened to you guys last night?" Izzy asked. "Were you mad about our fight?"

Fale laughed. "We didn't have a fight, Iz."

"So, we're all good?"

"Yep, we're good." *Until you find out I'm keeping secrets from you...* "Lisle and I just needed to go."

"Hiya," an extremely peppy waitress came to take their order, chewing her gum with her mouth open.

"Two waters- with squeezed lemon," Izzy instructed and the waitress sped off.

"That was fast," Fale said.

"She's been waiting for you to get here."

"What do you mean?" Fale panicked thinking of the men from last night. "How did she know I was coming?"

"Hello? Space case? I told her. I've been here for twenty minutes waiting for you. She simply wants a good tip." Izzy said.

"Then she needs to back up." Fale felt suddenly irritable.

"Fale. What's with you?"

"Sorry. I told you the other day. I'm just stressed and I've got things on my mind," Fale said, picking at her cuticle.

"Oh yeah, how is 'thing' doing? Where is he today?"

"Ha. Ha. Very funny. He's training."

“Is there a fight?” Izzy whispered.

“Yeah. I hate those. The Agency calls the fighters ‘warriors,’ but there’s no respect, there are no rules. Shouldn’t there be rules? Have you ever seen a fight?” Fale had never snuck out to go to the fights. They were so violent and deadly. The warriors didn’t battle for honor, they fought for money, and it disgusted her. When she trained, she imagined herself waging a battle for peace, solving disputes with honor. Ones she would win.

“You’re asking the wrong person.” Izzy said. “Sometimes I wish they’d let me in there. I’d shock them all.”

“Izzy,” Fale said furiously. “How could you want that?”

“What? To be a champion of warriors? To be rich and retire to do whatever I want instead of being in a selfless Takanori training center for my family’s sake? Studying to one day *maybe* get away from this place and move to the Glass Plant? I could start over in another sector. Why does it sound so awful?”

*It sounds like blasphemy. Not the way of the warrior.*

“The Agency warriors aren’t free to get rich and retire, though. That’s the thing. They make money for the Control Agency, and they might live to fight another day, but they are still prisoners to the system.” Fale thought about how trapped Keron felt.

“Don’t worry, Fale, your boy will be okay. He might break some bones, but he’ll live.” Izzy grinned sinfully over her drink.

“You’re evil.”

“I know. And you’re practically glowing.” Izzy’s voice got serious. “Spill.”

The waitress’s shiny black ringlets dangled in front of Fale’s face as she set down drinks. She took their orders, chomping and chomping. Fale was close to losing her appetite. Izzy sat staring at Fale with her arms crossed.

“Well?”

“I’m feeling happy? Is that believable?” Fale shrugged.

“From my friend who secretly reads romance, maybe, but the girl who loves rain and cathedral music, and fights like a demon? No. I don’t believe you’re ‘feeling happy.’ I haven’t seen you truly joyful since I saw you using your long and short swords. Have you been practicing with them?” Fale had received both razor-sharp swords in a ceremony at the Takanori Core Training Center and was only allowed to practice with them there.

“I don’t get to use them both together as the daisho until I’m fully Takanori.”

“Who says you’re not?” Izzy was indignant.

“Nelson said so. And yes, I have been happy since we met. Haven’t I?”

“Nope.” Izzy shook her braids. “But I barely knew you before Keron took your self-esteem out for a drag--”

“How yous all doing here?” the waitress interrupted.

Fale accepted her second drink from the waitress and took a sip. She thought about how young she had been at fifteen when she believed she was in love with Keron and he had crushed her. They had known each other for a short time. Being schooled in the TacTrac meant she had needed “extra syllabi social interaction,” or ESSI for short. Within this group of children, Fale made friends, and she had met Izzy there, but they had never talked. Izzy had brought around Keron, and he fit well with their clique, so he stayed. When the group didn’t judge him, he kept appearing at events until he had a place of his own. Fale had admired his courage, his strength, and his body. She had begun to know him, they talked and it seemed like he was her perfect match, but after he had shut her down, she felt stupid and humiliated. She wondered if she had imagined those qualities to begin with. For the past three years, Fale tried to be cordial to Keron at lunch, and avoid him at events.

She couldn't afford to like him, it hurt too much. She had forced herself not to fall in love with him again. She had shut down the emotion, stuffing it into darkness. She thought she had mastered the ability to feel nothing for him, but being with him now made her heart wake up from a deep sleep.

"What is that goofy smile on your face?" Izzy nearly yelled across the bar.

The musician was between sets and people's volume had died down so several patrons turned to witness Fale's expression. "Geez, Iz, be quiet. It's funny. I've had the worst couple of days, but I woke up yesterday morning feeling happy. I can't explain it."

Fale laughed as Izzy leaned over and felt her forehead. "I think you're sick. Where are you going after lunch?"

"I thought if you weren't doing anything, we could go to your place."

"Here ya go," Peppy, the waitress, returned with pizza and curried rice.

Izzy looked surprised. "You wanna come over?"

"We could do our nails or something girlish. I'll be your guinea pig." Fale was feeling abnormally feminine.

"Now I know you're sick." Izzy said around a mouthful of pepperoni. "You know how long I've been trying to make you over?"

"Since the day you met me," Fale said in mock exasperation, rolling her eyes. "I know."

"Wait, do you have a date or what? Tell me the truth, Fale Valine. Who are you going out with? I know it isn't Keron. Is it Bowen? Did he finally ask you?"

"Bowen? What? No. I'm not going out with anyone. I just came from Lisle's, I have an errand to run later and I'm meeting Keron at six."

"Again?" Izzy looked skeptical.

“Yes.”

“There’s the smile again,” Izzy accused. “Where did you sleep last night?”

“Izzy!”

“Well?” Izzy crossed her arms.

“On Keron’s couch. By myself, of course.”

“Then why do you look so guilty?”

“I don’t know,” Fale laughed.

“Where are you staying tonight?”

“Same place.”

“Do you want to sleep over on my fold-out?” Izzy offered.

“Not exactly.” Fale took a bite of her food and washed it down with her drink.

“Uh huh,” Izzy said. “You want to stay there.”

“You caught me,” Fale said dryly. “Of course, I do. One, I hate your fold-out. Two, his body is like art.”

“Even though he is grumpy as hell,” Izzy interjected.

“He’s been really sweet actually, until this morning. I said something. I don’t even remember, but he switched personalities.”

“Ever heard of bipolar disorder? I should report him to the mental system for treatment.”

“Iz, you’re not helping.”

“So, you wanna go get pretty for brawl-boy, huh?”

“Iz.” Fale rolled her eyes.

“All right. I love Keron, and you are really starting to grow on me. Promise you know what you’re doing.”

*Of course I don’t.*

“Sure, Izzy.”

“Hurry up then, ‘cause we’ve got a lot of work to do.”

“Really? I thought I was... kinda, at least, pretty already.”

“Honey, pretty is for little girls, we’re going to turn you into a woman.”

When the waitress came around with a scanner, they were ready to go. It felt so good to bond with Izzy, and it couldn’t hurt to look feminine for Keron. Like a woman. Maybe he’d see her as something other than a sprout, or a piece of meat, like this morning. Fale was excited for the first time in her life to be a girl. She walked with a bounce to her step and felt confident about any attackers because of her new enchanted dagger. She had taken a vow and did not want to kill anyone, but if it came down to her life, or an assailant, she hoped she would choose wisely. For now, though, a makeover was a time for her to not have to think about the enormous weight of her situation and how heavy it felt pressing down on her, like being inside one of the metal compressors at the plant.

Izzy led the way to her cluttered studio apartment as the sky turned dark and little raindrops began to pitter patter on the sidewalks. Thunder rumbled far off in the distance and the cool breeze made Fale shiver. She imagined Keron on his break and thought he was probably enjoying the cool breeze. She shivered again, but it was a nervous feeling like someone was watching without announcing themselves. Fale scanned the area, but she didn’t see anyone who appeared to be looking her way. Most people were hurrying to get inside before the clouds opened up and poured.

The girls made it to Izzy’s just as the heavens released their pent-up deluge. They shrieked,

running into Izzy's room. They put on music and Izzy danced around Fale. They did each other's nails, which meant Izzy had to fix her own. Then Izzy played doctor with Fale's eyebrows.

"Ouch," Fale complained. "You do this all the time?"

"Every day," Izzy said. "I only plucked the middle, you big baby. I haven't even shaped them yet."

"Sheesh," Fale pouted.

"You know what makes me mad?" Izzy applied a peel off mask and fanned Fale's face.

"What?"

"I heard from my parents on the way back to their apartment last night that the fundraiser money isn't even going to the families."

"Strange. What's it going to?" Fale picked at her mask, and Izzy tapped her hand.

"Stop that. It's really for building some metal soldiers."

"What? Like robots?" Fale asked.

"Yeah, I guess." Izzy took off Fale's mask and it made her eyes cry.

"It's not for families at all." The astringent made Fale sneeze.

"I know. Maybe since the robots are metal and so are the fantocci, they thought it was the same thing." Izzy shrugged.

"I doubt that."

"Who knows?" Izzy finally coated Fale with a light moisturizer.

"Whew," Fale said. "I'm glad I'm done."

"Done?" Izzy laughed. "Now you're ready to start."

Fale let Izzy do her make up and went to her happy place. She thought about lounge pants



and coffee mugs and smiley face flatcakes...

"I can't put lipstick on with you smiling," Izzy snickered. "Relax your mouth."

Fale obeyed. Once she sobered, she couldn't stop the insecurities from nagging at her mind. *Will he really like this? Am I being stupid? Maybe I'm not the beautiful type.* She reined in her doubts. So what if Keron didn't like it? She had the right to look nice for herself. Right?

"Are you ready?" Izzy asked.

"Yep." Fale said it with a pop at the end.

Izzy turned her to the vanity and Fale looked for herself in the mirror. Her eyes were shadowed in golden brown and her thick black lashes made her clear eyes glow from within. Izzy had used the makeup not to color, but to contour, and Fale's face had lost its girlish roundness, angling in under her cheekbones.

"The lipstick is all day wear," Izzy said. "So, you can't mess it up."

"How will I get it off?" Fale asked.

"You have to wash it off with soap, like the rest of it, silly."

"Thanks, Izzy," Fale hugged her friend around the shoulders. She finally looked like a mature woman. Nelson had raised her more like she was a boy. It felt liberating to lean on her feminine side for once.

"You're welcome. Drive him crazy. Since you twisted your hair already, and it's been raining, wait 'til you're ready and take it down. It'll curl up nicely."

Fale's new look was not something she would be keeping up with. She felt like a princess. She was being given the gift of this day. Her Takanori spirit was simple and she was conflicted with this new desire to look better than her natural self. She wondered if Nelson would be proud of how she looked, or if he'd want to wipe her face. She decided not to care. Today was a day for bonding with Izzy. Hopefully Keron would be pleased.

Fale wanted to show Izzy her new dagger, but she couldn't figure out how to introduce it or demonstrate it without explaining the circumstances behind it, so she didn't say anything. She began to feel guilty. They listened to a few songs, singing along, then Fale excused herself. "I've gotta go, Iz. I need to get a tincture from the apothecary before I meet Keron." She gathered up her bag and walked to the threshold.

"Good luck." Izzy smiled conspiratorially. "What do you think he'll say?"

Fale laughed nervously. "I'm about to find out..."

## CHAPTER 7

Once the sky cried its heart out, drip-dropping metallic pings echoed throughout Alloy City's roofs and structures. Instantaneously, Fale's skin prickled and her heart rate climbed. She got the feeling she was being monitored again. Even after surveying the empty courtyard, her intuition was heightened. Once she had completed a few blocks of left turns, the feeling went away and was replaced with a sense of purpose as Fale glanced at her timepiece in the darkness. It was almost six. The apothecary was two doors down and she was vaguely wondering how Lisle's presentation went, when a tall dark figure barreled into her.

"Ooof." The sound she made embarrassed Fale as the man pushed her into a seven-foot-wide alley between buildings.

*Focus, Fale!* She had not seen the attack coming and chastised herself. *What use is all my training if I can be caught so unaware?* She let him push her into an alcove so she could reach down to pull her dagger up and put it to his throat.

Keron held her arms to steady her and she sputtered, "What are you doing? I almost killed you!"

He looked at her with eyebrows raised and mouth agape, like she was crazy. "We got out early and there is someone following me. What are you wearing? Never mind. Quick, did you have a vision of this?"

"No. Sorry."

"They're coming," he whispered, listening to male voices. "Just act natural then."

"In an alley?"

Keron took hold of Fale's face with both hands and kissed her. "Oh. Now I get it," she whispered against his lips.

"Shut up, Fale." He dipped his head to hers, hunching his shoulders, but holding her head

gently. Keron's lips pulled at Fale's. She was lost. She pulled her bottom lip inside her teeth and let it go. He ran his tongue along the edge of her lip and she groaned. Keron chuckled. The metal part of his body was hidden in the shadows that covered Fale. The only thing visible was a couple exchanging passions. Keron's arm snaked around her waist and pulled her body closer, his mouth moving against hers in an urgent caress. The followers came upon the alley and continued a few feet.

"Where'd he go?" one asked.

"He's a smart one," a deep voice answered. "Probably figured out he had a tail."

"What about the guy in the alley?"

"He wasn't alone, if ya catch my meaning."

"What do we tell--"

"Shhh," the deep voice said, obviously the smarter of the two. "We'll go back and report. See what they got on the girl."

By the time the coast was clear, Keron had thoroughly kissed Fale. Twice. When he let go of her, she sagged a little. He chuckled. She couldn't muster up any anger at him for laughing at her. She was dazed. Suddenly Fale remembered her dagger and pushed him backward. "I almost killed you," she said fiercely.

"I'm the one who pushed you over." He smiled. "Not a very good defense, by the way."

"Because I was putting this enchanted dagger to your throat, stupid."

"Where'd you get it? What's it do?"

"Lisle enchanted it to cause my attacker a mortal wound."

Keron paled. "You could have nicked me with that thing!"

"You attacked me!" Fale accused.

“I saved us.” He crossed his arms over his chest.

“They weren’t following me,” she reminded him.

“Are you sure? They want you for something.” He raised an eyebrow.

“So where do we go now?” she asked.

“Don’t know if they’re watching my place or not.”

“I assume they are.”

“If I hoist you through the slats in my balcony, you can get in my bedroom window.”

Keron said.

“Um, yeah?”

Keron waited for her to comprehend as he said slowly, “You can get our bags...”

“Where’s your gym bag?”

“You mean this one?” He pulled on the strap across his chest. “I have another one under my bed.”

They made their plan and went to the back of Keron’s building, sticking to the shadows. First, Keron wrapped Fale’s right hand with a rag for padding and taped it, then he gripped her hips. “Remember, punch out the third slat and slide through, that’s where you’ll make the biggest gap to squeeze yourself and the bags. Grab your bag and pack me some denims, t-shirts and everything in my bathroom. I’m gonna move out of the way. When you come back I’ll see you. Then I’ll catch the bags and you. ‘Kay?’”

“What if somebody’s there?”

“I’ll whistle.”

“But they’ll chase you.” She worried, full of fear for Keron.

“I’ll be back, look for me.”

“What if you drop me?”

“Are you kidding? I’m made of stainless valezsan alloy. You’ll probably break me.” He grinned at her. “Don’t worry.”

She took a deep breath. “Here we go.” Fale jumped up as he lifted fast with his metal arm and all his strength. Fale barely perched on his shoulders and grasped the balcony floor. She counted over three slats and punched as hard as she could, feeling two of her knuckles split. She pulled back, imagining she was strong like Keron and punching again. This time there was a definite crack in the wood and a pop in her hand. She cringed, but she needed to hurry. This was no game. They were making noise and she had one more shot. Fale pulled back and broke the board and it felt like she broke every bone in her hand. She resisted the urge to cry out loudly, thankful her training helped her cope with intense pain.

“Good girl,” Keron said. He grabbed her feet and pushed up as she wiggled through the wood onto the balcony. She lay there for a second in the dark, seeing stars while she held down vomit and cradled her hand. *Get up, Fale. You can do this.*

She got through the window on adrenaline alone, packed Keron’s bag in the shadowy apartment, and followed the plan perfectly, right up to the “jump and I’ll catch you” part.

“I can’t.”

“Fale. We don’t have time for this.”

“I don’t like heights.”

“I don’t like turtles. Just jump.”

“I think I broke my hand,” she complained.

“I’ll fix you. First you have to come down here.”

"I can't do it, Keron."

"You can fight grown men with a two-foot blade, for goodness' sake," he sighed loudly.

"My long sword is twenty-three and a half inches," she murmured.

"See? I didn't know that, but I do know we can't stay here. Let's jump. We need to go."

"I'm scared."

"I'll catch you, sweetheart. Please."

*Call me that again. Please.*

"I'll try." She swung her legs out.

"I'm ready," he coaxed.

"Okay. Here I come." Fale gathered her courage and jumped into Keron's arms. He wrapped them around her, took a step back and bent at the knees, taking all her weight onto his valezsan metal leg.

"Told you I knew what I was doing."

"I believe you now," Fale said between breaths, her face pale and her skin clammy.

"I think you're going into shock."

"Where are we going to go?" she asked. "They are after both of us now. What did you do?"

"Nothing I want to talk about right now. Plus, I'm on the verge of making a connection, but I want to be sure." He set her down gently.

"So where to?" Fale asked as they picked up their bags and started walking behind the building.

"Lisle's?"

“No,” she said a little too quickly.

Keron narrowed his eyes. “I’ll ask you why not when we get settled. We’ll have to go to a guest house. The worse, the better, maybe they won’t scan us.”

“Why wouldn’t we want to be scanned?”

“I said I didn’t want to talk about this.”

“I haven’t run from Control for ten years. I need to know why. You will tell me when we’re settled.”

Keron shushed her and dropped his bag. “If we make it,” he whispered. “Here comes one.”

“Well idn’t it the metal man we was lookin’ far an’ he’s wit the little miss, what Terrence lost.” The stranger rubbed his hands together. “Hey Beck, Leo, over here,” he called.

*Crap.* Fale wasn’t afraid, but she didn’t want to be running from Control and possibly have witnesses see her leaving bodies behind the building. Her only weapon was the enchanted dagger unless she could dig through her bag for a better option. *Not likely.*

“My tools,” Keron remembered.

“Look in your duffel,” Fale grinned broadly. She knew she had done well when she had spotted them and thrown them in the bag.

Meanwhile, the men had gathered and were approaching slowly. Fale still had her hand wrapped; she could try to fight with both. She sank into a defensive stance. It was her duty to die as a warrior without reluctance, but she wasn’t about to die today. She was ready to meet all three men until Keron was available.

“Lookit that gents, we got us a pretty girl ready for a fight,” the first man said. “Beck, up ‘ere.” Beck stepped up with a wood plank similar to the one Fale had broken. Leo must have been the other one. He had a piece of pipe. Very little light was behind the building. The sun had set and people were coming home from work. Small squares of light lay on the ground from



occupied apartment windows. Fale tried to stay between them, in the darkness.

The three men stepped toward Fale slowly. She stood where she was, right leg back and her left knee bent; her right arm bent up behind her head pointing the dagger at the men, and her left arm straight out with the palm up. She bent her fingers, beckoning the men to charge her. Keron stood behind her, impressed with her bravery. He watched her begin to battle the first man, but the second man, Beck, stepped up and swung the board at her legs. She flipped backward and went back to fighting when Beck caught her in the head with the board. Her head seemed to pulse with the rhythm of her heartbeat. Keron moved to help her and ran right into the silhouette of Leo, the man with the pipe. “Which is stronger, metal man, iron or... whatever you’re made of?”

“It’s valezsan, you idiot.”

That made Leo irate. “At least iron is stronger than bone and before I pull you apart for scrap, I’m gonna break every bone in your body.”

“So, swing and quit jawwin’,” Keron incited the thug and ducked his first swing, blocking the return momentum with a glancing blow off his knife.

Fale was having difficulty keeping both men in front of her. This was no TacTrac drill exercise. No one was going to wait for her to get this right. She circled, but they circled slower until she was in between them. Blood dripped from her temple where the busted flesh was already swelling from being hit by the board. She pulled one man into herself, favoring her hand, and used his momentum to crash him into the man behind her. Algean Takanori warriors were peacekeepers, so she was trying not to stab anyone, knowing her dagger would kill them instantly. She’d never killed anyone before. If she could knock them out, she could get away; all she needed was a head start. She pulled with her good hand at the wood, as both men collided. Unsuccessful, Fale faced the men again with a series of kicks and jabs aiming for their eyes, noses, throats, knees and groins. There were ways to seriously disable a man without taking his

life.

Beck swung the board at Fale's shins but she jumped over the sweep. She punched his solar plexus, right where his ribs fanned out from his chest and knocked the wind out of him. As he fell she grasped his knee, lifted, and punched the side, making the man scream and roll in pain.

Keron had taken down Leo and saw Fale's strike as he ran to help. He saw her stumble as the remaining man punched her jaw. Fale's arm deflected the weight he put behind it, but her head snapped back and she spun around. The man smiled as he watched her.

"Fale," Keron warned her.

"It's okay, I've got it," She slurred.

"Let me help you." He put his back to hers, confronting the enemy. She shrugged him off and faced toothless again.

"Who do you work for? What's your name?" she asked, leaning slightly on Keron's shoulder.

"What's it to ya?" he replied. "I already knowed who you was, since you was a tyke," he leered.

"You've been working for them for a long time then? More than ten years?"

"I be meetin' yer mother once, a long time ago. I might be the last thing she seen." The man smiled with so many missing teeth, his mouth was a checkerboard.

Fale yelled a battle cry. She saw the red of rushing blood, whose, she didn't know. She saw it pulsing over her hands, her fault, her fault. Her parents were dead and it was her- no, it was his fault. This piece of trash standing before her. She raised her dagger in a passion-filled formless move and simply ran at him. She had never been so out of control, her every move in a fight was premeditated. She always knew her opponents and when to strike and where. But this was

nothing like that. This was like a blind rage.

The whole scene unfolded in slow motion before it happened. The man gripped her broken hand and twisted, bringing Fale to her knees. Then he spun her around, took her hand with the dagger, and held it to her neck. Fale didn't fight him then; she knew he had a killing move. She knelt in front of the man panting. She looked up to see Keron's eyes wide, an expression of shock registering on his flushed face, his weapons at the ready.

“What'cha wan' know girl? Last chance.”

“Why? Why her?” she asked as Keron's face fell.

“She gotta choose one. Her life or you.”

“But-” Fale began.

“That be all.”

Keron took a step forward, but the man said, “Not one more move. This one's comin' wit' me, ya see? Or I use dis pretty blade.” He pulled Fale up by the shoulder of her torn silk shirt, ripping the neckline further. Fale got up and stood motionless. “You not gonna try nothin' funny, huh? Or I carve her a nice smile.”

Fale wrapped both his hands inside her own and held the dagger to her chest. “Do it,” she said, angry and panicking, trying to coach herself into bravery. *A warrior is not afraid to die. I am not afraid to die.* “Both of my parents are gone. I have no family left.” She didn't want to be taken. Even if they were wizards, no one would ever hear from her again. As far as she was concerned, they were murderers, but she was terrified of the torture they might put her through. Better to end it now.

The man was so distracted by Fale's declaration, he jumped when he saw Keron attacking with his blade and mallet. Fale watched him charge the assailant with a growl. The man tried to drag Fale backward, and get his hands out of her faltering grip, but she held tight. *Come and get*

*him, Keron.* He pushed against her and pulled again. With her hands around the attacker's, Fale pushed the dagger in toward her chest and sank down to give Keron room to attack. She saw her attacker's panicked eyes scan the scene. Two of his men were down, Fale held his hands immobile with adrenaline strength, and Keron was charging him like a mad bull. Watching Keron's advance and realizing he was outplayed, he pushed against her with his foot and yanked himself free, then ran away yelling, "It's not the last time you'll be seein' me!" His maniacal burst of laughter followed him around the building.

Fale looked down as she felt wetness on her hands and slowly pulled the point of her blade from her chest. "Keron," she said, looking up at him. "Help." She let the shock of the evening overwhelm her and crumpled into his hands, losing consciousness.

Keron found them a room at a small disreputable guest house. He had carried her for several blocks, going down less traveled passages before Fale woke up. "Put me down."

"I've got you," he said confidently.

"I know. Please," she murmured. "I have my pride, too, you know."

"Yeah, about that..."

"Can we talk when we get to- wherever we're going?" Fale wondered if she looked as miserable as she felt.

"If you promise to be a good patient."

"I'm too tired not to be."

The owner gave them a lascivious grin and asked if they had credits or trade. Keron offered to do some maintenance work in trade for their room and some medical supplies, instead of swiping their wristbands. No questions asked.

The room was small, barely large enough for a double bed, mismatched side tables and a dresser, with a cracked leather chair in the corner. Everything was brown, except the carpet which was rust in color. Even the picture hung on brown paneling appeared to be a desert sunset. In the adjoining bathroom, Keron began running water in the tub. Fale lay back on the bed to wait for him to take a shower and closed her eyes. She felt a dip on the bed and turned her head to give him some privacy, but her eyes flew open when she felt the neckline of her shirt fall away. Keron touched her chest with his fingertips.

“This is still bleeding. I have to stitch it.” He looked pained. “Sorry.”

The water was still running. Keron burned a candle and heated the curved needle from the medical kit, pulling out what looked like fishing line.

*Probably is.*

“Take your top off,” he said as medically as possible.

“Really?”

“It’s just like a swimsuit, Fale. Nothing I’ve never seen before.”

“Not mine, you haven’t,” she said, feeling peevish.

*Why did he have to add that?*

Fale removed what was left of her shirt and took down the rest of her hair. Keron was threading the needle. He turned to look at her and picked up a shiny soft curl to let it slip through his fingers. He sighed.

“What?” Her voice was strained.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” he said.

“Just do it.”

“All right.” Keron left to turn off the water in the tub and came back. He put one hand on

Fale's chest and pulled the needle with the other. Fale sucked air in through her teeth, but made no other sound. When he finished, Keron checked her head wound. "This one'll hurt, but it'll heal," he said. "Anything I don't know about?"

"No, doctor," she said. "Only the hand."

"Okay. You're gonna soak in the tub while I go do some maintenance. I'll get you a bottle of vodka, with lemon, right? We'll numb you up really good before we splint your hand."

"Are you going to tell me why we're here? Why we're hiding?"

"I promised. I'll tell you in a bit. Go get in the tub. I'll get you a drink," he said, packing the needle into the medical kit.

"How will you do it?"

"Go as far away as possible to buy it. I'll hurry. You soak."

He left and Fale's hand began to throb as the adrenaline left her system. *Crap*. She took off her clothes and knife sheath with one hand. Keron had left the two candles from the med kit glowing in the bathroom. The tub was still steaming. Fale dipped her toes in and sighed, letting her foot fall all the way to the bottom of the tub. She stepped in and lowered her body into the scalding water. She could feel the stress of the evening melting away. Gently, Fale unwrapped and immersed her injured hand. She would heal. Doctor Keron wasn't so bad, either. Fale smiled to herself. What she really needed now was a good book.

The water was still nicely warm when Keron knocked on the door.

"Yes."

An arm came through the door holding a tall glass of clear liquid. "Drink up, that hand's gonna hurt like hell."

She leaned over the tub to reach his hand and took the glass. "Thank you."

“Be back in a while; I don’t know how much work he has.” Keron was about to leave, “Oh, here’s the rest of the bottle. Have a couple- you’ll need it.” He reached into the room with one eye shut and set the bottle on the floor.

The room was empty when Keron returned. Alarmed, he called, “Fale?”

“In here,” she slurred heavily. “I. Am. A. Raisin.”

Keron checked the bathroom and laughed. “How come you didn’t get out?”

“I can’t do it.” She pouted with her lip out.

“Your head is still bloody. Do you need help washing your hair?”

“You know what?” she asked. “My hand doesn’t work.” She wiggled it around to show him. “But it doesn’t hurt quite so much anymore.”

“Good. You drank a lot.”

“Yeah, I’m not usta drinkin’ so much.”

Keron took the shower attachment off the tub wall. “Hug your knees, I won’t look.” He washed Fale’s hair and got the blood off her scalp, then he pulled a towel off the rack. “Okay, give me your hand and stand up.”

“No peeking,” she said.

“No.”

“You don’t want to?”

“Fale, you’re killing me. Get out of the tub.” He wrapped her in the towel. “Be right back.”

Keron returned with her t-shirt and boxers. He put her head through the extra- large shirt. “There. Give me your hands.” She obeyed and dropped the towel. Keron held the shorts, and with one hand leaning on his shoulder, she stepped into them. He twisted her hair in the towel

and led her into the bedroom.

“This part sucks, Fale. I’m sorry.”

“Iss okay.” She slid to the headboard and held out her right hand dutifully. “I can hannle pain like a fighter.”

Keron had gathered a few pieces of flat metal hardware from his toolkit that would work as a splint. He worked quickly to realign her middle two fingers with a pop. She cried out briefly, then sighed at the release of so much pain. Her hand was still a swollen, ugly mess, and he felt around each of the bones. “If we’re lucky, then you’ve just dislocated these two in the middle.” Using gauze, he splinted Fale’s index and middle fingers together, then her ring finger and pinky together. Then wrapped her whole hand in gauze for the night to keep it stationary. “Need anything before I clean up?”

“Tell me why they’re after you. Why are we running from the scanners?”

“Control wants to throw the fight tomorrow.”

She gasped. “You’ll be killed. The losers almost always are.” Fale’s eyes were glossy while she fought for sobriety. “Whass the connection to me?”

“Whoever is after the key is in league with the Control Agency. First, they were following me. Now I’m seeing them at the gym, talking to my trainers. If Control knows them, then they’re powerful. Which means we can’t afford to be scanned.”

“I don’t wanna jump to conclusions, but I don’t wanna get picked up by Control, either. We hafta go back to Nelson’s. He’ll help. He knows about court, too.”

“Right.” The muscles in Keron’s jaw ticked as he clenched his teeth.

“What?” asked Fale innocently.

“Thought I was doing a pretty good job helping you figure things out.”



Fale sighed. "O' course you are, but we need an adult."

Keron pulled back. "Fale, I am an adult." He paused, looking defeated. "But I get it if you need his advice." He pushed the towel off her hair and wrung them both out.

"He's always taken care of me," she said. "They were putting me into apprenticeship when he rescued me."

"I didn't know."

"You never asked me anything that personal," she said.

"Touché."

She laughed at his serious expression, her head spinning. Her feelings were magnified. All the fear from earlier came crashing through her haze of vodka. "Pour me another?"

"Save it for tomorrow. You'll need it when you get the feeling back."

"You take care o' me, too," she said somberly, looking into his eyes.

"Yeah." Keron sat up. "You need it. Now go to sleep. I'll shower and be back."

Fale snuggled down into the sheets and breathed deeply. Keron nodded and left her.

The water shut off in the bathroom and Fale heard Keron turn out the lamps. He got into the tiny bed. Even though Fale was on her side, she felt him lying stiff as if he were trying not to touch her. Eventually, he relaxed and let his valezsan arm lay up against Fale's back.

"I'm glad you're not fighting tomorrow," she said quietly.

"Don't know how I'm going to get out of it, actually."

She turned to face him. "You have to. Keron, if they make you throw the fight you could be destroyed."

"I have too much value to them. I'm their money machine. I mean, one of them." He didn't sound so sure.

“What if knowing me has dropped your value? I’m the one with the key. What if they want us out of the way?” Fale worried. “And you’ve been so good to me,” she slurred as she lay on her back and started to cry.

In all the years she’d known Keron, she’d never cried in front of him. Not even the night he had shattered her heart. He rolled to his side, propped up on his elbow, to look down at her.

“Fale.” Her face was visible in the crack of moonlight coming from between the closed curtains. “This is not your fault. I know you got this gift and things went wrong, but this can’t all be connected to you. It’s too big. If I have to fight, I might go down, but I’ll try to defend myself.”

“Is it allowed?” she sniffed.

“No. But I can try.”

Tears leaked down the sides of her face. “What will I do?” she asked, slurring slightly. “What if I can’t do this alone? I don’t want to do this without you. You pick the best hiding spots and always know what to do. And you always find me and rescue me in alleys and kiss me.” She cried harder.

Keron leaned over her. “Fale.”

She stopped and sniffed, looking up at him.

Staring into her watery olive-gold eyes, he bent his elbows low and whispered against her lips, “Hush.” He pressed his mouth to hers, over and over, drawing her into his kiss. All their senses buzzed to life. She could feel his hesitation. He left Fale’s mouth and kissed a path to her ear.

“Roll away from me. Please.”

She sighed contentedly and did as he said. “Will you hold me?” she asked softly. It took a lot for her to ask for affection from him after the way he had treated her.

Fale thought about how young and handsome he'd been three years ago. She had been such an innocent teen. She was still inexperienced, but she had matured miles beyond her counterparts. She'd never forget the hope and love she'd felt when she had met him that night, and the desolation she wore after he had crushed her. They would never have made each other happy then. But now...

"I will." He wrapped his arm around her slender waist and she closed her eyes. It felt so good to be protected. It felt right.

"I didn't tell you what happened at Lisle's," she whispered slowly.

Keron's interest was piqued. "Who was there?"

"Just Lisle and me," she said, getting slower. She was falling asleep.

"What happened?"

"I turned into a boy." She yawned deeply and snuggled into him.

"You what?" he chuckled.

"Turned into a boy. Or he turned into me. Whatever," she yawned the last word.

"I think you're drunk."

"Well, ah, yeah. But it's true."

"Sure, Fale. Go to sleep."

She wanted to stay awake. She knew Keron would be trying to formulate a plan and she wanted to help. Thoughts about tomorrow's fight drifted through her mind. What could she do? She knew if she didn't do something, Keron would be a dead man, again.

## CHAPTER 8

Fale and Keron tried to avoid any place with a scanner as they clandestinely quick-stepped between the University buildings on their way to Barton Hall.

“Fale,” a male voice called from behind them. Fale jumped and was ready to run when Keron’s hand on her arm stopped her.

“Hey, Lisle,” he said.

“Oh, hey, Keron. Fale, I did my presentation. Got a perfect score,” he said proudly.

Fale realized what he was talking about. “Did you leave me out of it totally?”

“I had to give them something. They already knew you had the gift.” Lisle looked anxious. He whispered, “I know someone’s after you for the key. So, I told them about you and the boy.”

“What boy?” Keron stopped scanning the area and snapped his attention to Lisle.

“You didn’t tell him?” Lisle asked.

“I told you last night,” Fale said dryly. “You didn’t believe me.”

“You said you turned into a boy,” Keron said incredulously.

“Not exactly,” Lisle tried to interject.

“Yes.” Fale nodded.

“It’s not possible.” Keron threw his hands up.

“Welcome to my life.” Fale angrily crossed her arms.

“Great. Now you’ve pissed her off,” Keron said to Lisle.

Fale and Lisle both stared at Keron with their mouths open.

*Hello, stupid? You're the one who didn't believe me.*

Fale turned to Lisle. "Don't tell them anything else, okay? We don't know where our hostile friends are getting their information, but they could be sharing with Control. Some of the men we fought were at Keron's gym, talking to his trainers. And the men sent after us last night might have been involved with my parents."

"Whoa, wait, what guys?" Lisle asked. "Did you find out who's following you?"

"Beats us. We don't have enough to go on yet," Keron said. "I'm about to go tell Nelson I can't protect his girl. Great."

"I'm going to class. Hope you win later. I had a positive reading on your next fight. Izzy told me it was tonight."

"Why did you read for my fight?" Keron narrowed one eye in distrust.

"It's an assignment," Fale offered. Lisle nodded, fixing his glasses with one hand and holding his books in his other arm.

"You knew about this?" Keron accused her.

"Yep."

"You and I are going to find a quiet place somewhere, and you can explain all this Lisle business, but I need to get to the gym by two," Keron told her. "We only have three hours."

"Oh. I guess we'll see you later, Lisle," Fale said.

"See you guys."

To get into Nelson's building, Fale and Keron would have to scan themselves. They thought if someone else scanned to get in, they might be able to catch the door. So, they sat on the closest bench, like any couple, talking and waiting for the side door to open.

Around eleven, a man with a bow tie and briefcase walked up the sidewalk. Fale recognized him as one of Nelson's colleagues and poked Keron in the side. With their hearts pounding, they rose as if they were ready to enter the building and walked up to the door, at the last moment letting the man go in front of them. He scanned his wristband to open the door and they followed, going quickly to Nelson's office.

"Oh Fale, there you are." Nelson's secretary RoseMarie was seated at her desk, a miniature version of her boss's. "There have been people from Control here looking for you. And some others that wouldn't give me names. I've been worried." She lowered her voice and looked around. "Mr. Wickarsham hasn't been in for the last two days. He's missed all his appointments and I'm supposed to call this number at Control when I see you. Honey, are you in some kind of trouble?"

"Nelson's missed his appointments?" Fale asked. "That's not like him." She didn't know if she should say anything to RoseMarie or not. Who could she trust?

"Yes, but he did leave you this." She pulled a thick packet out of her desk drawer and handed it to Fale.

Fale took the bulging manila envelope, looking at Keron. "When did he leave it?" she asked the secretary.

"He had a meeting early Friday morning and came back with instructions to give this to you the first time I saw you, then he left for the day," she said. "I haven't seen him since, but the phone has been ringing non-stop."

"So, you don't have any idea who he met with?"

"It wasn't on the datebook. Something unscheduled. Look, Fale, I don't know what's going on, but I can't interrupt an investigation if that's what this is. I have a family. I need to call this number, but I'll give you a head start. If you need one?" She looked hopeful Fale would say no.

“Yes please, RoseMarie, it’s complicated. Thank you for all your help, though. I appreciate it.”

“You’re welcome.” RoseMarie exhaled. Dropping her shoulders and looking down, she expressed her sadness in her voice. “I’ll give you twenty minutes before I call. Good luck, Fale.”

“Goodbye, RoseMarie,” Fale said as Keron tugged at her arm.

They walked out of the office as quickly as possible, trying not to gain attention. Once out the side door, however, they broke into a flat run away from the building.

“I need to get to the gym soon,” Keron said when they finally stopped.

“We need to see what’s in here, first. It might be important. Besides, they’ll know where we are when we go to the fight. Won’t they just arrest us then?”

“Who said anything about we?” He looked angry. “You’re not going.”

“The hell I’m not.”

“I can’t fight and watch you at the same time.”

“Watch me? *Watch me?*” Fale yelled. Her stubborn independent streak spewed its fire from her throat. He had the ability to irritate her, like dust in her eye. Why did he insist she needed to be coddled?

“Calm down, Fale. I know you can take care of yourself. You know what I mean. I have to concentrate in the ring. You get that, right?”

“Yeah. I just need to know what happens. This confirms Control is involved somehow.” She faced him and gripped the front of his t-shirt in terror. “What if you don’t come back?” She was afraid to lose him now, while they were being followed by Control. Who knew what the agency would do to him if he showed up to fight.

Keron touched her face. “I’ll come back for you.” He smiled.

“Can we at least find a place to look through this stuff?” She waved the packet. “Humor me?”

“Fine. I’ll take you back to the guest house before I go, but we have to hurry, I’m running out of time.”

Keron unlocked the door to their room and Fale urgently dumped the packet on the bed while he turned on the lamp. Inside was a note, two wristbands, and a detailed map.

“What’s it say?” he asked.

Fale picked up the note. “It’s from Nelson,” she said, reading. “Oh no.”

“What?”

“It says: Fale, you are in danger. I found out about your father. Things are not what I thought. I can’t write much. Someone’s following me. To hide, you need to wear this alternate wristband. It has a new identity for you. There is one for Keron, too, because he is involved now. You both need to go to the house marked on the map. It is a building owned by your father’s coterie. They will contact you there. If you don’t hear from me, Fale, I love you.”

She looked up at him. “There’s a description on the bottom, with the directions. What could have happened to him?”

“I don’t know.”

“What’s a coterie? I thought Alloy City only had apartment buildings. Have you ever seen a house in the city?” She reread the note.

“Maybe it’s not in Alloy City. Let me see the map.”

“This changes everything. Again.”

“You can do this, Fale,” he assured.



Her face lit up, suddenly excited. “Now you don’t have to fight.”

“Guess not,” he looked uncertain. “It’ll take me at least an hour to figure out how to get these wristbands unhinged and the new ones in place. With the new ones, I can see how the locking mechanism works.”

“Can you tell the difference between them?”

“The female one is thinner. They always are.”

“Oh. Do we have to take the new bands? We’ll have to destroy the old ones.” She put her hand protectively over her band. “I’m kind of attached to mine. I mean, my whole life is recorded here. It’s who I am.”

“Don’t forget, the bad guys are after ‘who you are.’ Surely, there’s a bigger reason we need the new bands.”

“I can’t expect to accept change if I can’t let go, can I?” Fale lovingly slid her finger over the shiny display square. “I guess I won’t be my father’s girl forever, anyway. At some point, I’d have to change my name if I got married in this district.”

“Yeah, it’s only a band.” He looked sympathetically at her.

“Right. Then I choose to go first. I need to look through Nelson’s apartment before we leave the city. I can easily sneak in and out. Maybe he left some kind of clue for me about where he went,” she said.

“No.”

“No?”

“We’ll pack up and go there on the way.”

“I can do it myself.” Fale’s temper rose.

“Is life with you always a battle?” Keron ran a hand through his hair. “All I’m trying to do

is protect you.”

“I guess it is a battle.” She looked down at the note in her lap. “It’s a real pain, isn’t it? Being with me?”

“Fale, I don’t-“

“Don’t say it. Really. I shouldn’t have said anything. I’m just feeling sorry for myself.”

“Was gonna say, I don’t mind so much anymore. But if you don’t want to hear it…” Keron let his words trail off. He grinned a small dimple at her and Fale couldn’t help smiling back.

“Fix these things then and let’s go find this house,” she said.

Keron had underestimated how difficult the wristbands would be to change. They were made to be tamper-free. He had worked for two hours on Fale’s before he found the seam, uncovered the joint, and felt a give in the hinge mechanism. “Why don’t you cut the band off?” she complained, shaking her arm awake. Her fingers felt like tiny needles were sticking into her skin.

“Don’t you think people have tried it before?”

“I’m sure they have; I wonder how on Algea, Nelson got fake wristbands. That’s beyond the underground, even.”

Keron twisted the metal. “Ouch,” she complained.

“Sorry. Know it’s tight.” He twisted again and heard a snap as the metal bent. “Perfect.” The band released and Keron unhinged the broken locking clasp.

Fale rubbed her wrist while he got the new one ready. It would be much simpler to lock into place. She had never had a bare wrist. Since she was a child, she had been fitted with an expandable black band, until she received her adult band that would never come off for the rest

of her life. Any adjustments had to be made by Control. Tampering with the band was an offense. Fale felt the weight of her situation as Keron put the new piece of hardware on her arm and locked it into place. Forever. This was serious. Whoever this band said she was, she would be from now on.

Keron had his band off in half the time. Fale had been studying the map. “We can go north, through the city, to Nelson’s apartment, then cross the molten river where it’s cooled. We’ll have to head east for a few miles. The house is beyond the city limits, deep in the marsh. Did *you* know there were buildings out there?”

“There can’t be many. What’s it say to look for?”

“A green house with a white door,” she said. “It should blend in with the plant-life in the marsh. It has a symbol on it. It looks kind of like an upside-down tree in a circle but the roots run horizontal like a river in front of a setting sun.”

“How do you know it’s setting?” Keron asked, locking his new band.

“It could be rising. It has rays coming out of it, so I thought of evening.”

“Ever seen it before?”

“Not that I know of.” Fale squinted her eyes at the paper and shook her head.

“Ready to go?” Keron asked.

“I guess so. I wish I knew who this wristband says I am, or if it’s blank. I don’t know if I should use it or not.”

“We’ll find out. We can always have the owner scan us before we leave to see who we are now.”

“Good idea. I’m ready.”

The guesthouse owner was happy to scan their bracelets for the price of the room, even though Keron had already done the maintenance. Keron's band identified him as twenty-eight-year-old Mr. Brock Palmquist. "They made me older," he whispered, frowning. Fale was laughing until she was identified as twenty-one-year-old Mrs. Bryla Palmquist. "What?" she asked the owner, who looked confused.

"Don't y'all know who you are?"

"Yes." Keron pulled a sputtering Fale away from the machine. "My wife's just had a traumatic day." He tried not to laugh out loud.

"Thank y'all for the payment. Come back any time." The owner called after them as Keron dragged Fale out the door.

"What was Nelson thinking?" Fale shouted, swinging her bag in the air.

"I seriously doubt Nelson had anything to do with that part." Keron chuckled deeply.

"This is not funny, Brock."

"Actually, Bryla my love, it is."

Fale punched him in the arm and shrieked in pain. *Wrong hand.* Keron opened his mouth to speak, but at Fale's fuming expression, he leaned over and took her bags instead.

Nelson's apartment was very publicly located above the TacTrac. They didn't want to be seen, so Fale and Keron stood away from the structure to watch for an opportune time to enter. "We can leave our bags behind the training center and go in the back," Fale said, "but once we get inside you'll have to follow closely. If anyone sees me, they may not wonder why I'm here, but if Nelson's been gone, then they'll ask me why. And we can't afford to spend any time in the open."

"You sound like me," Keron approved. "Don't worry. I'll be right behind you."

They dropped their bags by the back corner of the building and sneaked in the rear entrance. Fale led Keron up the stairs and into her old home. They split up to look around the apartment. Fale checked Nelson's bedroom, but his luggage was still there, as well as all his toiletries. He wouldn't have left without his necessities. She didn't see any disturbance in his clothes, either. She saw Keron in her old room with the small mattress and little things on display. "Did you grow up here?" he asked, and she nodded. "Was it good?"

She knew what he was asking. Was it good to be free? After losing everything, was it good to be adopted by a lonely bachelor? "Yes," she confirmed. "He rescued me." He nodded this time.

In the living area, an envelope on the kitchen table caught her eye. Fale was sure Nelson would have left her more information if he was leaving for any length of time so she immediately opened it. There was a small note inside and as Fale began to read it, she squeaked a noise of distress. Keron rushed to her side to catch her as she sunk to her knees. Fale knelt in his lap. She leaned on him, shaking and holding the note in her good hand, saying, "No, no, no. Not him." Over and over.

Keron took the note from her and read it under his breath. "Girl- your guardian should have kept to his own kind. Now he belongs to us forever. You are next."

"What does it mean? What are 'his own kind'?" she asked.

Keron rocked her. "Don't know, but we can't stay here. They knew you were coming."

"I didn't even know I was coming," she said blankly.

"Come on, Fale. Snap out of this. We need to go. We'll think it over when we get to the house."

"They took him." She stared at the note.

"I know."

“Just like my dad.” She remembered the day she found him on the floor, bleeding. Fear worked its way up her spine like a spider on a web.

“Maybe not-” Keron began.

“I have to rescue him.” Fale sat up quickly. She couldn’t lose someone else. Nelson was the only family she had left. “I have to find him.”

“We will, Fale. We’ll try. Can we go now?”

“Should I pack his things for him?” she asked no one.

“Maybe we should take some food with us,” he thought out loud.

“Yes. He’ll need to eat,” she agreed. Her expression was blank.

“Fale, don’t lose it on me, Sprout. This isn’t like you. You need to eat, too. It’s been too long.” Keron piled as much food as he could fit, into a canvas bag from a hook in the kitchen. Fale stood still. When they were ready, Keron quickly took the bag and Fale’s hand and led them back to their hidden pile of baggage, which was slowly growing. Fale was barely aware of the time, but it was getting late. Call time was six for the seven o’clock fights, but most of the gamblers would be at the underground for the main attraction at eight. The fight Keron was supposed to lose.

Fale stood next to her bags and stared into space. She would never get to the house without him. Keron gathered all their things with his metal arm and took Fale’s hand again. “Come on,” he coached. “We still have a way to go and it’ll get dark before too long.”

“He’s gone. They’re both gone,” she said woodenly, her face void of emotion. Fale was functioning automatically. She let her head hang. She didn’t feel like a warrior, she didn’t feel like a girl, she didn’t feel anything.

“I know, Fale, I know.” He interlaced their fingers.

He led her to the northern edge of the city. She saw him hesitate and look in the direction

of the underground, but he took a deep breath and she tried to smile at him. They entered the marsh together. They walked and walked, their shoes sucking in the mud. Keron wore construction boots, but Fale had only her thin suede boots, letting her feet get wet and cold. He held her hand the whole way, she wasn't sure if he was comforting himself or her. The reeds were shoulder height and hard, but easy to push aside. Fale worried about leaving a trail at first, but the reeds stood right back up to whack their hands.

They didn't speak. Wrapped in the coolness of the evening, she wondered what this new house would be like. Would they be confined to it? What did this mean for them? Fale didn't understand what was happening to her safe and simple life. It was invigorating to have a purpose, but devastating to think about rescuing Nelson when she didn't even know her enemy. How could she fight what she didn't know? She struggled to master her emotions and calmed herself with breathing exercises as they walked.

The house was farther east than they had thought. By the time they reached its little front porch, Fale was walking on her own. It didn't feel like he was dragging her anymore. The small green house stood by itself in the marsh without a street or surrounding houses. If they hadn't known where to look, it would have been impossible to find the structure. Keron looked back and Fale was watching the moon rise. "You okay?" he ventured.

"I think I will be," she admitted. She thought about apologizing for temporarily losing her sanity, but she didn't want to call any more attention to her lapse of emotional control. Instead, she offered him a tenuous smile.

"Looks like the right place," he said, motioning to the building.

"It has the symbol by the door, look." She pointed. "Is it open?"

"Key's in the lock." Keron said in disbelief. He easily skipped the two steps on the front porch, ran his hand over a weathered wooden chair, and touched the pristine white door. He opened it up and used the light of the setting sun to look around. They brought their bags through

the tiled entryway, to a comfortable living area with wing-backed chairs and a navy sofa that looked new. The room ran the length of the house and its large picture windows facing North had an uninterrupted view of the mountains. Fale felt drawn to the sight.

The East side of the house consisted of two closed doors and a kitchen. Keron helped Fale bring in their food and set it on the small table for two. Fale got the lanterns and lit them with matches she found by the stove. There were two shopping bags of food mixes already on the table. Added to what they'd taken from Nelson's, they had enough food for a few days. Fale looked around the house; it appeared to be run by a generator. The mysterious rooms behind closed doors turned out to be a bathroom, with a standing tub, also attached to the one bedroom with a feather bed covered in quilts.

They met back in the living room. On the coffee table lay Fale's long and short swords, along with her favorite bladed fan and staff; there was also a set of women's armor. Another letter lay with her weapons, but Fale didn't rush to read this one. She simply stared at it.

"Want me to read it?" Keron offered.

"Would you?" She was relieved when he nodded. Keron unfolded it and read it to himself first. When he looked at Fale, she was standing with her eyes closed, waiting to hear the worst.

He began to read aloud, **"Fale, there is a battle going on we knew nothing about. I sent the weapons for your protection and so you will know you can trust these people. Also, because I haven't told you that to me you have become a full Takanori warrior- you have mastered the grief of losing your parents. Use the daisho, but only when you need to. I will meet you as soon as I can. ~Nelson"**

Keron glanced up at Fale again and though her eyes were still closed, she smiled sadly. Her arms were crossed and her eyes opened to see deep into his, shining with unshed tears. She blinked them away and took a deep breath. "What did the letter from the apartment mean?" she



asked. "He belongs to us forever. I don't get it."

"You sure you wanna talk about this now?" he spoke in calm, clear syllables like she was a stray animal about to be caught.

"It's not going to stop hurting. I have to face what's happening."

Keron seemed impressed with her turn-around, but a little wary. "Obviously, he's been kidnapped, but I don't get the forever part. Unless they're making him a fantocci."

"Even that doesn't make sense, fantocci don't live forever."

"Didn't say it made sense. Maybe they have him hidden. We only need to find out where."

"Maybe these coterie people of Dad's know. I hope Nelson knew what he was doing sending us here," Fale said.

"We'll find out." Keron motioned her over to sit on the couch. "They'll either help us, or we're sitting in a trap."

"I wonder when they'll contact us."

"*We* didn't even know when we were coming," he said.

"Maybe they have visions, too?" Fale said. "I hope they hurry."

Keron threw an arm around her shoulders. "Are you saying you don't want to be in this tiny house in the middle of nowhere with me, Mrs., Mrs., what's our last name again?"

"Palmquist."

"Right."

"For the rest of your life, Brock." Fale sighed, shrugging off his arm. She was not enjoying her situation. "I can't believe this is happening. Any of it." She tried to blink away the tears threatening to fall, looking away before Keron could see her out of control emotions. Why would Nelson have given them bands that made them older and married? Didn't he care how

embarrassed she would be? Or did he realize she had never given up hope Keron could return her feelings from so long ago? She didn't know how to act around him now.

"There's nothing I can do about it tonight. I'm gonna eat, shower and go to bed. I suggest you join me."

"If you think that I..."

"Didn't mean anything by it, Fale." He sighed, then ducked from her slap and chuckled, "Though we *are* legally married now."

Fale didn't want to think about it yet. She smiled tentatively. "I suppose I could use something to eat."

"And get out of those wet shoes." He untied his boots and toed them off.

"Yeah."

"And get some sleep." He stood from the couch and lifted her boot by the heel to dump out her foot with a mighty pull.

"Totally." She smiled genuinely. "How do you know me so well after just a few days?" They had known each other for years, but they'd never been so inseparable before.

"Is that all it's been?" He released her other foot.

"Yeah."

"Don't know, maybe I've paid more attention than you thought. Want some tea?" he asked, changing the subject.

"Sure. Herbal tea helps me sleep. I can't seem to relax with all of this going on." She waved her hand in the air to include the whole house in her statement.

"Do you want me to sleep on the couch?" he asked politely, at the kitchen door.

Fale looked surprised, "I thought... since last night... oh never mind." She blushed.

“What?” he asked.

“You take the bed,” she said softly.

“I wanted you to have it.”

“Okay.” She blushed bright pink.

“Okay, what? Fale.” Realization hit him. “Do you want me to share the bed with you? Like last night?”

“Okay.” She nodded.

*Real smooth, Fale.*

Keron chuckled. “I can do that. Lemme see if there are tea cups here.” He disappeared into the kitchen, reemerging in a few minutes with two cups of chamomile. Fale sipped hers while Keron drank. “Why don’t you go clean up first,” he said. “I’ll wait.”

Fale left her boots by the front door and used the shower head hung above the big tub. The hot water soothed her body and warmed her feet. She put on her pajamas and called to Keron, “All yours.”

Going back to the living room and sitting on the couch, Fale sipped her tea. She found the food Keron had left out for her and ate some dried beef, carrots, and beans they’d taken from Nelson’s. Fale re-read Nelson’s letter three times.

*Takanori. He called me a Takanori warrior.*

It only hardened Fale’s resolve to find and rescue her guardian. Keron exited the bathroom with a rolling cloud of steam. Fale laughed. “Feel better?”

“Yes,” he said confidently. “You eat?”

“Yep.” She finished her tea. “I probably should have eaten sooner though; I was getting light-headed.”

“Lemme help you.” He offered his hand.

Fale took it with her good hand and stood. Keron left her standing by the couch while he put out one lantern and took the other one back to her. “Come on.” He took her hand and walked her to the left side of the bed, pulling back the covers. She got in and he set the lantern on his bedside table before getting into the bed.

Once the light was out, however, Fale wasn’t tired anymore. “Tell me your earliest memory,” she said into the darkness.

“Hmmm. Guess that would be my mother.”

“You knew your mother?”

“Yeah,” he said. “For a while.”

“I didn’t know.”

“I don’t talk about it.”

“Oh. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to—“

“Fale. I’m talking about it now,” he said. “I have this memory of her washing sheets. She was hanging them to dry in the sun. I remember her being sick and on her own, and crying because she knew she was going to be leaving me alone. I may have had a brother or sister, I don’t remember. Then she fell down and didn’t get up. I can’t see her face anymore, but I know it was beautiful. I know her eyes were blue and I remember her long hair, the same color as mine.”

They were both quiet for a long time. “My—” Fale began and sighed.

“Stop,” Keron said firmly.

“What?”

“You don’t have to tell me about your mother, Fale. I saw how upset you were last night.”

“No. If I am a real Takanori warrior, like Nelson said, I have to be the master of my grief. I want to tell you,” she said.

“Okay. I’m right here.” They both lay on their backs next to each other; Keron picked up Fale’s hand for reassurance and they linked fingers.

“My dad found us. My mom and me. She was pregnant, nine months along, with me. Someone had beaten her and cut her stomach open from top to bottom. I was supposed to die, too, I’m sure. I would have, but my father came home and scared them away. She hemorrhaged and I was crying in her dead arms. I don’t know if she really got to see me or not. It was supposed to be a message, I guess. I never knew who did it, but now I wonder if my father actually knew the whole time.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I had my dad, though. He was great. I didn’t know what was happening when he was killed. I found him in our apartment lying in his own blood. He gave me the key and told me to hide it. I was so scared; only an eight-year-old child. I hid in alleys for as long as I could until Control picked me up.” Fale felt Keron’s flesh-covered mechanical fingers gently stroke the back of her hand. She knew he understood the feeling of loss and she had to hold back tears that threatened to open the chasm of grief she had worked so hard to contain. It took all her control just to tell him the story as a matter of fact.

“I’m sure he was great.” Keron squeezed her hand, urging her to continue.

“What about your dad? What was he like?” Fale tried to distract herself from thoughts of her parents’ deaths.

“I don’t think I ever had a dad.”

“We are a sad pair, Mr. Palmquist.” She laughed.

“Yes, we are, Mrs. Palmquist.” His grin made lines near his eyes, and tucked a sexy dimple

into his cheek that drove her wild.

Fale rolled on her side to face him. “What’s your favorite color?”

Keron faced her, on his elbow, head in his hand. “Green, like grass. You?”

Fale ducked her head. “Blue, like forget-me-nots,” she half-whispered.

“Why are you so shy all of a sudden?”

“Because it’s the shade of your eyes,” she said.

Keron smiled. “I have one. When was your first kiss?”

Fale did not want to answer this one at all. It was definitely too embarrassing. She thought back in her childhood. Surely, someone other than Nelson had kissed her cheek at least.

“Fale?”

“I heard you,” she snapped.

“Are you thinking about it?” he asked incredulously. “How many boys have you kissed that you can’t remember the first?”

“It’s not that I’ve had many…” she said quietly.

Keron thought about it. “You don’t mean… In the alley?”

“Yes, yes, yes. Okay?” she said. “You were my first kiss, alright? Oh stars, I am so embarrassed.”

“Why would you be embarrassed?” He tilted her chin up with his finger.

“First of all, I’m eighteen. And you don’t even like me-”

Keron snapped. “Say it again.”

“Say what? You don’t even like me?”

He leaned forward and kissed Fale hungrily. Keron cradled her shoulder under his right

arm and dove his left hand into her hair, holding her head to his. Fale could smell his clean scent, hear his breath, feel his lips, her every sense heightened at once, as if awakening from a coma. He might be fantocci, but the way he kissed was all man. His lips caressed hers with a tenderness that made Fale ache. He nipped her bottom lip and pressed her mouth open to deepen his exploration of her. Fale was drowning in him. She sunk deeper with every pull of his kiss. His touch electrified her skin. When he leaned away, she was breathing heavily.

“Now say it again.”

“You don’t...”

“Do you believe it?”

“I don’t want to. I must. I- You said before-” she stammered.

“Forget before.” He brushed his scarred knuckles across her cheek.

“How?” she asked, her eyes wide. She wanted to trust him, but how could she just forget everything he’d said before?

He growled. “How do I convince you?”

“I need- I need- More? More than a few kisses.”

“Give me time to show you things are different?” he asked.

“I’ll give you all the time I have,” she promised.

“Done.” He pulled her face to his and kissed her until she stifled a yawn. Then he laid her head on his shoulder and wrapped her in his arms. “Go to sleep,” he said. “We can talk more tomorrow.”

“I think I like this better than talking,” she murmured.

His chest rumbled with laughter, “Me too.”

“Goodnight.”

Keron kissed the top of Fale's head. "Goodnight."

~\*~

He lay awake thinking about how wrong he'd been about Fale. She wasn't simply a spoiled kid who was lucky enough to grow up free of the Control Agency, and egocentric for being a Takanori warrior in training. She had definitely "sprouted." The more he thought about the young woman in his arms, the harder it was to keep his thoughts pure. He held her to him and she snuggled closer, trusting him to keep her safe and warm. He liked the feeling. A lot. It almost made him feel like he had choices, like a free man. That was it. Being in the little house made him feel like a real man, not a fantocci, and Fale was at the center of it all. He was surprised to realize she was the reason he felt so happy. She never had this effect on him in the past. Before now, she had just been another off-limits girl to a fantocci like Keron, one he desired but couldn't have. Fale had come to mean something to him and he stood on a road he never thought he'd choose to travel. She turned her face toward him as she fell asleep and Keron brushed her hair back. His heart thumped heavily. When had she become so lovely? When had he started to care? Could it be she'd been what he wanted all along? He decided to stop fighting his control and see what it felt like to try to make her happy. She deserved to be happy.

Keron brushed his lips across her forehead. Maybe he deserved to be happy, too. For the first time in his memory, he was excited for tomorrow.



## CHAPTER 9

Fale woke to the whisper soft caress of Keron's nose tracing a long figure eight along her jaw to her ear. She smiled and stretched out her legs. The mouth at her ear nipped her lobe. "Good morning."

"Good morning," she said, surprised to find him so affectionate. She was not going to complain though; in fact, she would take advantage of whatever she could get.

"You slept late, but you look so peaceful when you're sleeping." He held his head up on a propped elbow.

"You were watching me sleep?"

"Not long."

"Good. Because that's creepy," Fale laughed.

Sunlight shone through the window of the little bedroom in their tiny house. It was too easy for Fale to pretend she lived here as Mrs. Palmquist with Keron.

*Whoa. This is so "not happening" as Izzy would say.* Fale tensed slightly and smoothed the quilt over her stomach.

Keron sensed her abrupt change in demeanor. "Should we find coffee and flatcakes?"

"Definitely," Fale agreed.

After getting dressed and gorging themselves with breakfast, Fale walked around the house. "I don't know what to do," she lamented. She felt awkward being alone with him in the small house. Married. What was Izzy going to say? She'd probably be mad she never got to be

the maid of honor at their wedding. Fale sighed inwardly, Nelson would never be able to give her away now.

Keron mumbled from the kitchen, “Gonna fix this stupid faucet.”

Sitting in front of her weapons, Fale tenderly unsheathed her long sword from its saya. Her injured right hand shook, but she held on, using her bicep to bear the weight and swung. Her sword clattered to the floor. Fale picked it up quickly, touching the new divot in the dusty wood flooring with her toe.

*Oops.*

She got out her wiping cloth and cleaned the blade from guard to tip. Then she used the same motion with her oiling cloth, careful not to touch the blade with her fingers. Nelson said finger oils would rust her blades. She did the same with her short sword.

Then Fale took a weapon in each hand. She stepped out into the room where she had space to move. The long sword in her right hand and the short sword in her left, she sank into a low crouch. Meeting an imaginary on-coming offender, she began to circle her swords slowly, feeling their weight as an extension of her arm. Fale made downward arcs with one arm and upward sweeps with the other one; coming back around with her own momentum to slash diagonally in a ballet of jewel steel. She pulled her deadly long sword from her hip straight out, cutting upward, twisting her hips back slightly and finishing her opponent with the short sword. Fale’s body began to heat up as she moved faster and pushed herself harder. It felt so good; when had she last trained? She moved lithely and with purpose, her routine speeding up as she moved to more powerful strikes and cuts. Her anger grew as she imagined practicing deadly strikes on the ones who took Nelson from her. Fale pushed on. She became so engorged by the rage of the past few days, she barely felt her grip faltering. Finally, a powerful swing threw her sword from her hand. The vibrations rang like a dark melody throughout the small Palmquist house as the deadly weapon stuck several inches in the wall.

“Damn.”

She stood, feet apart, shoulders back with her short sword, breathing deeply like a warrior on the battlefield. Fale looked over to the kitchen to see Keron watching her. “You know that’s creepy, right?” She laughed at him.

He smiled, crossing his arms over his chest. “Never seen you with swords before.”

“They were always used in the training center,” she said. “I didn’t carry them.”

“I can see why.” He looked at the sword sticking out of the wall.

“Yeah. Be glad it wasn’t you,” she said dryly. “I have an injury, you know. I don’t usually do that.”

“You should let me see your hand.”

“I have to clean my blades again and put them away.”

“Do you need help?” he asked.

“No.” She looked at him incredulously.

“Sorry,” he mumbled, putting his hands up.

Fale retrieved her blade from the wall and wiped it down, nearly dropping it twice more and finally got it into its saya. She put the rest of her weapons away while Keron checked drawers and cupboards. Even though she wondered what he was looking for, Fale was feeling proud and didn’t ask.

“Aha,” he said. “Wanna play some cards?”

Fale managed to look mildly interested. She really didn’t know if she had the coordination to hold a hand of cards after the strain of sword training. “If you want to,” she said.

“You’re acting weird. Let me see your hand.”

“No, it’s healing fine. You’ll just mess it up.”

He laughed. "How can I possibly mess it up?" Keron sat down on the couch next to her and demanded her hand. "Give it to me."

"Fine," Fale spat, thrusting out her bandaged hand. He unwrapped the gauze to find her two middle fingers looking like purple and blue sausages. The torn skin on her knuckles was angry and red around yellowish scabs.

"Your fingers are still bruised, and they're getting infected," he said.

"Really?" she asked sarcastically. *Crap*. She had been hoping it would heal on its own. Being taken care of wasn't so bad, but it stung her pride.

Keron ignored her. "You need to soak your hand to get some of the infection out." He brought her a bowl of hot salt water and made her immerse the hand for thirty minutes. After cleaning it with some clear alcohol, he smeared what little salve he could find in the kit over her knuckles and re-wrapped her hand.

"Better?" he asked.

"I'd rather drink the alcohol," she said sourly.

Keron laughed. "I know a few drinking games," he said mischievously.

Fale smiled. "Maybe a few..."

They had a few drinks, but Fale was restless. "I can't sit here and do nothing."

"What do you want to do?" he asked.

"Let's make a plan. Nelson is gone and we need to find him. Where could he be?"

"It would be easier if we knew who had him." Keron stacked and shuffled the cards alternately with the ease of a gambler.

"I guess you're right, but I have to do something. I'm going to make a list of all the places I can think of that Nelson went to, all the people he knew, and the students he told me about."

Fale got paper and graphite from her bag. “There’s gotta be something there, a connection I’m not making.”

Keron took the paper from her. “You talk and I’ll write.”

They spent the afternoon together, the two of them coming up with ideas and trying to connect one to another. They had a meager lunch of fruit, meat and crackers, then were at a loss of things to list.

“What now?” Keron asked.

“Now we figure out how to inconspicuously search these places,” Fale said. “We should go at night, I think.”

“Fale. Nelson said you were in danger. Can we afford to go back to the city?”

“We have to. There is no choice. This is why we have fake bands. Lucien knew we would need them,” Fale’s impassioned speech echoed through the house.

“Okay.”

“Okay? So, what now?” she asked.

“You’re the one ready to bound out the door. I think we should wait to see if these people show up. How can they find us, if we aren’t here?”

Fale felt awkward. It was suddenly quiet and she remembered they were here alone together, *married*. She didn’t have the first idea how to do this. She was never taught to be domestic. Never having a mother, she was at a disadvantage. There hadn’t been any women around the house to watch or learn from.

Unexpectedly, there was a knock at the door. Fale and Keron stared at each other. She felt instantly vulnerable. Keron held up a hand and nodded to her, then went to the door.

“Who is it?” he called.

“The coterie representation. We’re here to see Brock and Bryla Palmquist.” Keron opened the door slowly. There stood two unassuming- looking men of similar height, both with brown hair, one graying. The one with deeper brown hair wore horn-rimmed glasses and a black suit with a bow tie. The other man had silver streaks in his hair and wore a distinguished navy pin-striped suit with a red tie. He held his hand out to Keron. “Hello. I’m Lucien, and this is Ash.”

“I’m, ah, Brock,” Keron said.

The man smiled. “Very good. May we come in? We have a lot to discuss.”

“Sure.” Keron opened the door to let them in.

Fale came out of the kitchen and looked the men up and down. How were they not muddy? Lucien and Ash walked comfortably to the living area and sat in two chairs facing the couch. “Do sit, my dear,” Lucien said to Fale.

“Did you know my father?” Fale decided to forego manners and get to the crux of why they were here.

“He was my brother in the coterie.” Lucien smiled warmly at her. Like he knew her.

Fale sat next to Keron on the couch, “What’s a coterie?”

Ash looked taken aback. “They didn’t tell you anything?”

“No,” Fale said irritably. “No one told me anything. Kinda like now.” She crossed her arms.

Lucien’s face softened. “You’re just like him. Your father. He was a stubborn mage. A family of mages is called a coterie. Make sense?”

“Kind of,” Fale said.

“No,” Keron said.

Lucien was patient. “What don’t you understand?”

“What is a mage?” Keron asked.

“Tell me more,” Fale pleaded.

“Your father was a master mage and was tasked with an important destiny. I’ll get to that later. When he was found out, your mother’s life was taken from him, then he sacrificed his own life to make sure you and your key remained safely together.”

“So, do you know who killed them?” Fale’s voice shook.

“Yes, but first you must know who you are.”

Relief swept over Fale. At last she would be getting some answers. She’d waited years to know her heritage and who was responsible for destroying her family.

“I must be part-mage if my father was. It must be why Lisle says I have dormant power.”

“What the hell is a mage?” Keron asked.

“Someone born with natural magic abilities,” Ash offered.

Keron laughed. “Like hocus pocus?”

Ash’s smile fell. “Like this.” He held out his hand and flames danced in his palm.

“Don’t be arrogant, Ash,” Lucien admonished. He looked back to Fale. “You are a mage, yes, but in a most unusual way. Are you familiar with the stories of Princess Effailya? She was also a mage, a very powerful one, who lived a long time ago,” Lucien said.

“Yes, I’m named after her. And I read a little,” Fale said. “She lost a political battle and was banished, right? My key starts a machine to free her people somehow?”

“I’m afraid you’ve been reading the ‘accepted’ version of the story. The old fairy tales are actually closer to the truth.”

“Oh, I have one, but we never really paid attention to the part about the princess because we were so focused on the key.” Fale got up and dug through her bag by the door, finding the

notecards in the pocket. She brought them back and handed them to Lucien. "Is this right?" she asked.

He read the story and nodded. "It's a good paraphrase."

"What does it say?" Keron asked.

"You're the one who wanted to skip it," Fale said.

"I was falling asleep from exhaustion," Keron said sharply. "It's been a busy couple of days."

Ash cleared his throat.

Lucien said, "If I may: 'Once upon a time there was a princess of mages, named Effailya, who loved science. She was beautiful and enraptured a wizard named Gryndoll. As the best of friends, together they explored different dimensions with a device she invented, but she did not love him.

One day, Gryndoll asked the princess to marry him, but when she said no, he was so unhappy he created and proposed a set of laws to rival hers. Though she was the princess, the people divided between them and Gryndoll sent Effailya and her followers to another dimension to stay forever.

On her deathbed, Effailya used her gifts to return to Algea and try to free her people. She would have to reawaken the mechanical device she created when the time was right to fight for her people. Some say Effailya found the key to the machine, but her people remain in Garrith. No one knows what happened to the key. Without it, her people might remain banished forever.' But it is not the end of the story, is it, my dear? What's your first question?"

"I didn't know other dimensions existed. Was it common to travel to those 'other' places?" Fale asked.

"No, I don't believe so, but it was a time of magic and Effailya was a pioneer." Lucien



watched her.

“You don’t think it’s my destiny to free her people, do you?” Fale understood a need to help the ones trapped in a dimension not their own, but she didn’t feel responsible for being their hero.

“Is Fale a direct descendant or something?” Keron asked suspiciously.

Lucien and Ash looked at each other. “Fale *is* Princess Effailya.”

“Not possible,” Keron said. “No way.”

“Wait a minute,” Fale said, holding her hand out toward Keron’s chest. “How?” She shook with the knowledge that it could be possible. Could it be why she felt so *old* sometimes? Could it be why her heart ached for unknown reasons? She wanted to know. It could explain the deep desires she had for unknown dream places.

“When the princess returned to Algea, she became an infant to a family of mages who knew she was coming. They made sure she knew her destiny. Essentially, Effailya returned to Alloy City as Vivyan and found the key to the machine from the wizards, but the time wasn’t right; so, she left it for her great- granddaughter Corrine, who was herself, but the time still had not come. Then Corrine passed the key to her great granddaughter Fale, who was herself,” Ash said.

Lucien continued, “Every life cycle, Effailya lives in a new body. I know this is a lot to understand in one conversation. Each time you turn 18, you gain the gift of sight and it is our job to inform you of your heritage; especially now, since you have not been brought up in our ways. So, you will know when the time is right to set free the prisoners in Garrith.”

“Prisoners?” Fale was taken aback by the word. She remembered the metal man as he raised a baton above her in the rain and shuddered.

“Surely you don’t think they choose to be there?” Ash interjected.

“I guess I hadn’t thought about it,” Fale said, dazed. *Me. A princess. My people.* “Wait, so I’ve been four people now? Is that what you’re saying?” Fale finally spoke about the topic everyone was avoiding.

“I know it’s overwhelming, my dear.” Lucien said kindly. “I’ve tried to be as simple as possible for now. I’m sure you’ll want to know more, later.”

Fale thought about how any of this could be happening to her. Keron looked just as stunned.

“Do you have any questions before we take our leave?” Lucien looked to Ash and raised his eyebrows.

“I have a million,” Fale said.

“Yes?” Lucien looked at her with a soft smile.

“Who is after me, and my key?”

“There is a lot of information and I hoped I wouldn’t overwhelm you with everything at once,” Lucien said.

“If you know, then I need to know, too. Please tell me.” Fale leaned forward, clasping her hands.

“From the first time the people divided between Effailya and Gryndoll, there have been two sides. Once Effailya was sent to Garrith, the people were made to keep secrets and many forgot what had happened. It was forbidden to mention. This generation doesn’t even realize there is a battle that lies dormant like a sleeping volcano in their midst. Even now, it is waking, though their backs are turned.”

“What battle? I don’t understand. Gryndoll died.” Fale stammered. She cleared her throat, she would not admit to being overcome.

“We called it the ‘Battle of Oakenheart’ after the royal family, but it is simply the battle

between the wizards and us mages. They are who tracks you now. The wizards led by Gasten. He is Gryndoll's great, great, great grandson. If they had their way, they would revive the machine to open new dimensions in search of magic for Gasten to steal and increase his power. He would find weaker species and imprison them, strip them of their magic, and leave them as he absorbed their life essence and became stronger. You must not let it happen."

"So, the wizards killed my parents? I think somehow, I was aware of a battle, I could feel it. I won't let them have the machine." Fale's voice shook. "Wait, do you think they know about my visions?"

Lucien looked surprised. "Why do you ask?"

Keron put an arm around her shoulders. "Seems somebody is one step ahead of us, each time Fale has a vision."

"It would make sense," Lucien said.

"It's the only thing that makes sense," Ash interjected, crossing his ankles.

"We'll just have to be extra careful," Keron whispered into Fale's ear.

"Do you have any more questions tonight?" Lucien's eyes probed Fale.

"Only one. Can you help me find Nelson?" Fale doubted there was anything they could do, but she still hoped.

"I'm afraid we don't have enough information yet, my dear. All will be done to save him when we can," Lucien said.

"I guess that's what I expected. Thank you anyway." Fale rose to shake their hands.

Lucien and Ash excused themselves and Keron walked them out, shutting the door tightly. It was starting to darken so he lit the lanterns again. Neither of them spoke.

"What does this mean?" she asked.

“A whole lot.” Keron stood across the room from Fale. “The wizards must be in league with Control because the men after us have not been from the Agency,” he thought out loud.

“It explains why the wizards are after you, too. Control belongs to the wizards. Gryndoll made the new laws for the people when he sent Effailya away. Control runs your life, I’m sure they don’t want you helping me,” Fale said, visibly shaking. “My mind is so full of information; I don’t know what to think about first. I don’t know what my next move is.”

“Can’t freak out now, Fale.”

“I know. I still need to find Nelson, and those wizards know his location,” she said.

“Why not go ask Lisle?” Keron said sarcastically.

“Lisle! I forgot about Lisle,” she said. “Wait. Why are you being like that?”

“No reason,” he shrugged.

“Keron,” Fale said, rising and going to him. She put her forehead to his chest, but he left his arms at his sides.

“What is it?” she asked.

He put his hands on her shoulders and held her away from him. “You’re a princess? A magical princess, for goodness’ sake, and I’m just a bondsman.” He leaned his head back and looked at the ceiling in pain. “I have nothing. Nothing to offer you.”

“Keron,” she pulled on his head, but he resisted. Her heart clenched within her chest. She wanted all of him, but she would settle for what he could give. He was so much more than any other man she’d ever met; strong, fearless, determined, creative, kind. How could he think he had nothing to offer? “Please,” she begged. He let her bring his face to hers and she whispered, “You give me safety and support. You’re my champion, and I know the time to fight has come because I have you next to me.”

For the first time she kissed him, and he let her set the pace, exploring him. She pulled

back suddenly. "That was a really good idea," she said.

"What?" He laughed, kissing her nose.

"I should go to Lisle's."

"You were just now thinking of *Lisle*?"

"They were using him for information on us. He needs to know. He could be in danger if they find out we're gone and he talked to us without knowing," she said.

"I guess. I think you want out of this house." Keron hesitated. "But I was thinking I could maybe show up to one of the small underground fights and get some information on these wizards."

"I think you want to get out of the house and kill something." Fale grimaced.

"So, we're in agreement that we're stir crazy?" He smiled at her.

"Yes. And I need answers."

"Will you be careful? I mean it. Stay where the streets are lit. Wear a scarf to disguise yourself. Remember you're Bryla Palmquist now," Keron said. "Walk different, talk different. Be someone else."

"I will, if you promise to come back to me."

"Done."

Fale made up a disguise for herself. She dug through her things and decided against sunglasses at night. She finally found a scarf to cover all her hair, so she put it in a bun and swept the scarf around her head, but she still looked like Fale. So, she put on workout leggings with a long form fitting top and a skinny belt, something she would never wear together in public; then slipped on her black leather flats and scarf. She added the makeup Izzy had given her. Finally,

she looked like Bryla.

Keron was in the living area with his tools, waiting to walk Fale into the city, when she came out of the bedroom. He wore workout pants and a long-sleeved t-shirt that covered his limbs, and a stocking cap, pulled down over his ears. He watched her walk through the room carefully, his eyes narrowing.

“What?” she asked. “You said to get a scarf.”

“But the rest of it.” He pointed to her body. “And your face.”

“I have to look like Bryla.”

“It’s not for Lisle?” he asked, his voice gruff.

“No, silly,” she laughed. “Let’s go before you miss fight call.”

“How’re you gonna walk the marsh in those shoes?” he asked.

“I hadn’t thought about it,” she said.

“Wear your boots. Carry the black shoes to the edge of the city, then switch them.”

“Good idea.” She gripped her flats and stepped into her boots.

After trudging the two miles back to their entrance spot, Keron and Fale exited the reedy marsh. He put one arm around her tiny waist, preparing to split up, and kissed her soundly. “Remember, be careful,” he said with his forehead touching hers.

She trembled from nervous energy and his kiss. “Come back to me.”

“Meet you at the house.” His voice was soft as he looked around for anyone who might have seen them exiting the marsh. “Can you find it?”

She confirmed with a nod, but bit the edge of her lip, looking around as well.

Fale walked as quickly and quietly to Lisle's as possible. From shadow to shadow, she slipped behind buildings until she reached Lisle's complex. With her gaze down, it occurred to her on the way that he might not be home, but when she knocked on his door, he answered.

"Hello?"

"Lisle, it's me, Fale," she whispered loudly.

"Oh." He unchained the door and ushered her in, looking outside in both directions. "Did you know Control is looking for you?"

"Yeah. It's what I'm here to tell you. I need to know how to tap into this power I have. And I need to tell you who you're working for."

Lisle sat in his chair and Fale took her place on his tiny couch. She explained to him as best as she could what she had been told by Lucien and Ash, swearing him to absolute secrecy. Fale had known Lisle almost as long as she had been taking lessons and she knew she could trust him.

He didn't take the truth very well. "Not Gasten. He's the Source Wizard, the leader of all wizards. He has to be good. And they wouldn't do that to me, Fale."

"I'm sorry, Lisle. Why else would they need your readings on Keron and me?"

"They asked for all my friends."

"The original person who banished the princess and wanted the key was the Source Wizard Gryndoll. He took advantage of the king on his deathbed, and since Effailya was ruling by proxy, he punished them all. They aren't what you think they are," she said.

"Fale. I can't believe it. It would destroy everything I hold true. The wizards are good. There's nothing I want more in life than to be a wizard, because they help for good. They can help people reach a higher version of themselves."

"Fair enough. I know they're part of your life. I won't pressure you. We can still be friends

though, right?" she asked.

"We'll always be friends." Lisle reached out a hand to her.

Fale let go of the breath she'd been holding, and took his hand. "Do you still want to help me?"

"I'll do what I can," he said.

"How do I release this power?"

"With some heavy-duty magic; or it's something you have to do yourself."

"I don't know how," she pulled her hands back and clenched her fists. She couldn't do magic; why did everyone think she had this great power? She didn't feel it.

"Could you fight the first day you practiced? No. You have to find it and practice."

"Is it what you do?" Fale asked.

"I use spells. They have magic attached, I suppose, but I did have to practice a lot." Lisle said.

"What about the boy? Do you think he knows anything?" The idea hit Fale like lightning.

"No idea. Should we try to find out?" Lisle said with a twinkle in his eye.

"What do I do?" Fale asked.

"Get comfortable. I'm going to try to put you into a trancelike state." Fale lay back on the couch with her hands clasped over her stomach. "Close your eyes and listen to my voice." She could hear Lisle moving around, but tried not to be curious about what he was doing.

*Relax, Fale. Breathe, listen.*

She concentrated on the words he said even when they turned into words she didn't understand. Fale felt herself drifting, drifting; she bravely met what was coming head on. She faded through colors and space...



Fale heard sheep bleating through the ears of the boy. At least, as a child she was taught that sheep say “baa,” though she’d never seen one. She moved to look for where the noise was coming from and felt as if her back was a blazing furnace. She lay on her side on a hay pallet in a thatched hut with a window full of moonlight and an open door. Fale tried to sit up, but the pain in her shoulders and back sliced through her. Her shirt stuck to her and pulled at the burning flesh.

The pallet next to hers was empty and Fale wondered who slept there. It hurt so much. She lay back down and panted. Fale had never known such pain. She closed her eyes. *So much for finding out information.* She wished Lisle would call her back, but what if he couldn’t? There was always the boy’s little sister. This time she needed to get some answers before she found herself being cast out again.

A noise at the door made Fale open her eyes, shining with pain. “I brought you more chili plaster. Mother Rill added some herbs to help with the healing.” The little girl entered the hut with a small bowl in her hand. “Roll onto your stomach, Taran.”

Fale assumed she was talking to her and dutifully eased from her side to her belly. She felt the coarse material of her shirt rip the skin from her back as Taran’s little sister carefully lifted it. She cried out in pain, surprised to hear a man’s wail work its way from her lips.

“I’m sorry. I know it hurts,” the girl said.

Fale said nothing as the girl spread a heated concoction over her entire back.

“That was really stupid, you know, provoking a guard. They could have killed you.” She pressed cloths into the mixture, which burned almost as bad as the wounds, but felt strangely refreshing. “Next time you decide to get ten lashes, at least stand up for yourself, not me.” She gingerly pulled the fabric of Fale’s shirt down, and Fale heard her snuffle. “You were so brave. Mama would’ve been proud.” Fale didn’t know what to say.

“Taran? Are you all right?”

“Yeah,” Fale said in the boy’s voice. “I need to talk to you, but I need you to stay calm.”

“All right.”

“Do you know the stories of princess Effailya?”

She snorted. “You mean from every night?”

“Yeah those. Well, I’m, I’m not Taran.”

The little girl leaned down in the moonlit dark and looked into Fale’s eyes. “Who are you?” she asked angrily. “And do *not* tell me you’re Princess Effailya. Where’s my brother?”

“He’s safe. He’s in Alloy City in my body.”

She gasped. “How?”

“I don’t know exactly how, magic I guess, but we switched places,” Fale said.

“Do people practice magic in Alloy City?” the girl asked.

“I never knew it existed until recently, but it turns out there is magic hidden everywhere. The mages and wizards are fighting the same battle they started with Gryndoll and Effailya. Do you know about Alloy City, I mean, the Industrial District?”

“We came from a city named Sorche, a long time ago. But our queen was named Effailya.”

“Then why are you here?”

“We’re slaves for the machines that guard us.”

“Slaves?”

“Yes. Especially the descendants of the royal family, Effailya’s family. The machines are in charge now.”

“Effailya’s family? But she came from Alloy City.” Fale was confused, but the other girl

was catching on.

“Maybe that’s what they call Sorche now. It has been a long time and names change. It is said Queen Effailya returned to her home to find a way to help us. Does she lead in Alloy City now? Did she send you here? Who are you?”

“The Control Agency is our government. I’m Eff... I’m Fale. Maybe you should call me Bryla? I’m still figuring it out.”

“You don’t know who you are? Do you have memory loss?”

“It’s complicated," Fale said. “What’s your name?”

“Minova.”

“Where are we, Minova?”

“In Garrith,” the younger girl confirmed.

Fale was frozen in shock. “I think I need to go back now. Can you send me back like you did the other day in the rain?”

“That was you?" Minova asked and squinted as if to see Fale through her brother’s eyes.

“Yes.”

“Taran told me he went to a strange land.”

“It is different from this," Fale said. “We don’t have a castle. Do you have a king in this castle?” She beckoned out the window.

“No, it’s for the wizard and his machines.”

“What wizard?" Fale asked.

“The one who rules the machines,” she said, acid in her voice.

“Okay, Minova, can you send me back?”

“Yes.” The girl nodded.

“How do you do it? Do you all have powers?”

“Just me. It’s why Taran worries about me showing them. He says maybe I’m more powerful than the others. When I talk sometimes, things happen.”

“I won’t tell anyone here. In Algea, I mean,” Fale said.

They looked into each other’s eyes, and Fale nodded. “Go away,” Minova said.

Fale opened her eyes to see Lisle sitting in front of her with his elbows on his knees. His shirt was unbuttoned and a t-shirt was defining his chest. She stared at his body.

*When did Lisle grow up? When had he gotten so handsome? Has Izzy noticed? Focus, Fale.*

She looked up to see him watching her.

“Fale?” he asked.

“Yeah, it’s me,” she said.

“That was fascinating.” Lisle exclaimed, nearly bouncing out of his chair.

“I found out his name, where they are and that he’s a slave to a wizard and a bunch of machines,” Fale offered. It made her sick to think of “her people” being slaves. Those machines were terrifying with their bloody hearts behind glass. She remembered how angry and oppressed she felt when she was in Taran’s body and she resolved to do whatever she could to help free them.

“I got the same thing. And a lot of questions. Who did you talk to?” Lisle asked.

“Taran’s sister, Minova. She told me the people of Garrith are slaves. They beat him, Lisle. It hurt so bad. I couldn’t wait to get back.”

“I’m sorry. We could have talked all day. He was so excited you have the key to free them.”

“I have the key, but no machine, no idea where this dimension is or how to free him. Please tell me you didn’t say I was the princess?” Fale pleaded.

“No, but I can’t refute parts of your story now,” Lisle said. “I don’t know what to do with it, Fale.”

“I get it. I do. It’s unbelievable. But try to keep your eyes and ears open, okay?” She held her hands open in front of her.

“I can do it.”

“Did Taran know anything about magic?” she asked.

“Nothing. For being descendants of a race of mages, I find that strange,” Lisle had his thinking cap on.

“Unless they are under a spell,” she offered. “I’d better go. Keron will wonder what happened to me. Say, do you have any books on tapping into my natural power?”

“I have two on mages, period. Wanna borrow them?”

“If I can,” Fale said.

“Sure,” Lisle thumbed through his massive bookcase, alphabetized of course, and chose two books. Fale took them with her good hand. She flipped through them. One looked like a course book on mages and what they were, the other one appeared to be more about the inner workings of the society.

“What happened to your hand?”

“Got chased. We had to get our stuff from Keron’s so I broke through the balcony to get in. Can you fix it?”

"I can't, but I think you might," Lisle said. "Read those books. See if it helps."

Fale stood. "Thanks Lisle." She kissed his cheek. "I appreciate it. Please don't tell anyone I stopped by."

"What about Izzy? She's worried sick."

"No, I need to tell her everything from the beginning. I will soon."

They walked to the door. "I don't know if I can lie to Iz. She's my friend, too," Lisle said.

"It'll only be a couple of days, Lisle. I promise."

"Okay," he said. "For you."

*For me?*

"I'll see you, Lisle." Fale didn't tell him the directions to the house in the marsh for his own good. She slipped out the door.

The cover of night made sure no one noticed Bryla Palmquist walking from the well-lit streets of Alloy City into the shadows carrying two large books, until she came to a Control agent standing near the back of the Cornerstore with a scanner. "Excuse me, Miss. I need your identification." He looked her up and down. Fale was glad for the scarf to cover her hair. She tucked the books under her arm and walked calmly over to him, her eyes scanning the area to make sure they were alone.

When she put her right hand out to be scanned, her bandages caught the Control officer's attention. "What happened to your hand?"

"Oh that? It got in the way of a slamming door, so I wrapped it. Nothing serious."

He looked suspiciously at her for a minute and was reaching for his communication device when Fale held her band over the scanner. It made a series of beeps, which was unusual for a

scanner. Fale was sure she was caught, then her identification popped up on the screen. “Oh, sorry for the delay, Mrs. Palmquist. Be careful out tonight, we’re looking for a pair of criminals.”

“Oh my. And you thought it could be me?”

*Laying it on thick, Fale.*

“I apologize,” he said, tipping his head. “Be safe.”

“You too.” Fale’s heart beat out of her chest. *A criminal?* How had she elevated to criminal status?

“Have you been to the library?” the man asked, as Fale was turning away.

“Excuse me?”

“The books,” he pointed to the volumes folded in her arm and smiled. “What are you reading?”

Fale’s blood was a roaring whitewater river racing down from the mountains, speeding over rocks and bursting through trees, drowning out the sounds around her. She swayed. “N-n-nothing important,” she stammered and took a step backward.

The agent’s smile dropped. “Let’s see.”

Fale thought of running and was about to take another step back when the agent grasped his communicator. She couldn’t let him call for reinforcements and she didn’t want anyone combing the area right now, Keron was still out there. Without thinking, Fale dropped her books and stepped toward the agent with her left foot.

Swinging her right leg around, she planted her knee into the agent’s side. He made a muffled sound of surprise and alarm as he lost his breath. Fale ripped off his communicator and threw it. The agent followed it with his eyes, just as Fale had planned. She swept his feet from underneath him and ran behind the man, putting him in a choke hold before he could react. *This guy must be new.* It was almost too easy. Fale looked around, suddenly spooked. In a matter of

seconds, the man was unconscious. With great difficulty because of her hand, Fale dragged him into the shadows, to be sure they weren't easily seen. She left him in a public washroom, locked the door and broke the knob off from the inside. She gathered her books and left quickly.

She worried about Keron, who was much easier to recognize, but thought he knew what he was doing. Everything in her wanted to go to the fights. He needed to know the agents were out tonight. Maybe he was already caught? She was halfway to the underground when she remembered what he'd said. *I can't watch you and fight at the same time.* He would not be happy to see her there. More than likely, her presence would end up causing them to run for their lives. Fale stopped walking. It was better to let him "do his thing," and meet her back at the house. What if he was already there? She smiled and turned around, almost giddy at the thought of going home to him.

Finding her boots at the edge of the marsh, she changed shoes. It was difficult to do with her bruised fingers, but she managed on the second try. The mud was going to ruin her suede boots. She chastised herself for thinking about boots at a time like this. Fale waded back to the house and let herself in. Emptiness greeted her. She showered, ate a sandwich, and settled on the couch to read Lisle's books by the lantern light. She began with the informative book even though she was dying to dive into the inner workings of mages. She needed basics first.

Eventually Fale nodded off and woke up half laying on the couch, with her feet tucked under her. Her toes tingled with pins and needles from lack of circulation. The book lay open and her neck was stiff. It was ten thirty.

*Where is he?*

She walked the floor until her feet felt normal. Then she walked some more, her arms crossed. How dare he worry her like this? She made him a sandwich for when he got back. Surely, he'd be hungry. Then Fale wrapped it in paper and put it in the miniature fridge, run by the same generator as the stove. She cleaned the kitchen. Then she played a game of solitaire on



the coffee table; twice. Finally, Fale went back to reading. She decided to read the other book this time, looking for a chapter on finding your natural power.

As it turned out, mages raised their children in their gifts; as part of secret societies where it was common and the children didn't know any different. But some, as in her case, had been cut off from the society at a young age and never learned their gifts. Maybe her gift was only Sight? But Lisle had said she had dormant powers.

The book said re-emersion into the society was necessary to find those gifts, but she didn't know how to get a hold of Lucien. Maybe he'd know, if he had some magic gift to see her. She thought of lying in bed with Keron and blushed, hoping Lucien didn't have that much insight.

The book did talk of having magic in one's hands, like Ash had held the flame. Fale held her hand out and thought hard. She felt warm, but nothing happened. She looked at the clock and felt her eyelids grow heavy. Twelve thirty. Fale found a picture of the princess, but she kept losing focus. She read the same sentence three times and still didn't know what it said. At last her head fell back against the arm of the couch and she was asleep.

Fale felt her body being lifted and carried, but she was too tired to wake up. She felt the feather bed underneath her and snuggled under the covers and into the waiting arms of her champion.

"Where have you been?" she mumbled, falling asleep.

She barely heard him whisper, "Forgive me, Fale."

## CHAPTER 10

Fale woke to the most beautiful face she knew- covered in cuts and bruises. His lip was swollen and split on the right, his left eye was purple and blue, and a cut on his left brow had been badly stitched.

Fale lifted the covers to see bruises blooming along Keron's ribcage, as well. She grimaced.

"You know that's creepy, right?" he teased.

"I thought you were going to fight. Not be a punching bag," she pressed her lips together.

"I guess I had other, things, on my mind."

"Was this just one fight?" she asked.

"No."

"I waited up for you," she said. "You didn't come. I thought..."

"Oh Fale, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to worry you." He hugged her gently against him.

"They scanned me by the TacTrac."

He looked down at her, concern evident in his expression. "What happened?"

"He saw my hand and almost called me in, but I scanned okay. He said they're looking for a criminal."

"Wow."

"We're criminals now," she said.

"This keeps getting more and more complicated."

"Then he wanted to see my books on mages," she grimaced.

“What books?” he asked.

“The ones Lisle had given me. I’ll show you later, but my bracelet scanned okay, and I was about to leave when he asked me about them.”

“Oh crap.”

“Yeah,” she agreed. “So I left him unconscious in the back of the corner store.”

“Fale,” he rubbed his eyes with one hand. “You have managed to blow our cover in how many days? You’d better hope that they don’t connect Bryla to you and go looking for you both.”

“I know, but what else could I do? I couldn’t get caught and I needed to buy time for you. Did you find out anything?” she asked.

“Yeah, met some plant workers. They’ll tell you anything you wanna know if you win them money.”

“Then how do you know they’re telling the truth?”

“Majority rules. It’s why I risked staying for so many fights. Luckily, the Rowdies were in fine form, so I could stay as long as I needed to fight. The first time I heard the story though, I didn’t believe it. I had to hear it from someone else. The second shift night workers, out betting before the job, told me that’s when it happens,” he said.

“What happens? Do they know where Nelson is?” Fale asked.

“I hope not.” Keron looked at her seriously. “Gasten’s wizards are using the plant to turn people into machines. They bring in criminals in the middle of the night and remove all their skin and organs.”

“Oh, my stars,” Fale whispered in horror.

“I know.”

“Why would they perform a whole-body transplant? I don’t think it’s even possible. Unless you use magic. Besides, I haven’t seen any criminal machines walking around.” Fale got deathly pale and covered her mouth.

“Fale?” Keron reached out to touch her.

She didn’t respond. Keron shook her shoulder. “Fale. Don’t do that.”

“It’s the metal army. I know their plan,” she said. Fale got up and started getting dressed, not even caring Keron was staring dumbfounded at her. Fale went into the bathroom and Keron tripped into his denims trying to follow her.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“Packing.” She grabbed the sandwich from the fridge, shoved it in her shoulder bag, pulled on her boots and was about to walk out the door when she barreled into a solid wall of muscle.

Keron stood in the doorway in just his denims. “Wait right there. Where do you think you’re going?”

“I have to find Lucien, there must be a clue at Nelson’s. I need to find my powers so I can find Nelson and rescue the people in Garrith.”

“Hang on, now we’re rescuing *all* the people of Garrith?”

“They’re my people, Keron. They need me. They’re slaves to the machines. That’s where Gasten is sending them.”

“How do you know?” he asked.

“When I was at Lisle’s, I turned into the boy again to ask him questions,” Fale explained. “I was in Garrith, Keron. I saw the machines the first time I went. One was about to hit me. They’re intolerant and cruel; it wouldn’t surprise me a bit if Gasten stripped them of their humanity with the transformation.”

“Are they whole body transplants?”

“When I saw them, I thought they were modified machines, but yes, it looks like a total body. They keep their face and their heart. At least, that I could see. There has to be magic involved,” she said.

“Won’t people miss them?” he asked. “If the jail empties?”

“Don’t you see?” Fale’s voice rose. “Anyone who stands against Gasten is a criminal. *We’re* criminals. Once they get my key, did you think they were going to set me free? What better way to punish me than by making me punish my own people as slaves in Garrith. Forever.”

“Come on Sprout. I won’t let that happen. But you can’t run out of here half-cocked.” Keron put both hands on her shoulders.

Fale reluctantly stepped back into the living room. “How am I going to find my powers?”

“I don’t know,” Keron said.

Fale’s sight faded to a pinpoint and she began to have a vision. *A great light shot from her hand and Lucien looked on proudly.* Fale swayed slightly, but she smiled ruefully. “Lucien’s on his way,” she told Keron. “And Gasten will know I’m getting my power.”

“I’ll get dressed,” he said.

When the knock finally came at the door, Fale bounded off the couch like an excited child. Keron laughed.

“Wait till you see what I can do,” she said to him, opening the door. Lucien entered the little house in a newly pressed pair of khaki’s and a navy polo, tucked in and belted. He carried a full canvas bag.

“Thank you for coming,” Fale offered.

“You were ready to join us and begin the process,” he said simply. It still crept Fale out a little that Lucien knew when she needed him, but she was glad for the help.

“Yes. I need to know my powers, if I have any.”

“In your...past, you have exhibited many powers.” Lucien was trying to be as gentle as possible, she could tell, but Fale had to know what she was capable of.

“I don’t think I’m ready to grasp the whole idea of living my life repeatedly. But somehow, I know you’re telling me the truth. I feel it.”

“When you are ready to be the princess, you will be shown what to do.”

“Thanks, Lucien.” Fale gestured to the living area where Keron sat. “Please come in.”

Lucien sat in the same armchair as he had the other night, so Fale sat on the couch again. “What do I need to do?”

“First, you need to join the coterie. We will be your support. Our family has been guiding your descent for all these years. Our sage has seen you have chosen this as your time to rescue your people. The situation has never been as ripe as it is now.”

“Yes, I have chosen. It has to happen now. I can’t see another way. I can’t go live as Bryla and forget them,” Fale said vehemently.

“And have you chosen a wardsman?”

“A what?”

“Protector, or captain of your guard.”

“Oh.” Fale didn’t look at Keron, even though she could feel his eyes burning holes through her. “I have.”

“I thought so.” Lucien smiled at them both. He pulled an ancient looking book out of his

bag, full of yellowed pages, probably four inches thick. He flipped the book open to the front and ran his finger up an almost empty page to the fourth entry and wrote: Fale Valine Argohdian. In the box, next to her name was space for what looked like her thumbprint, by the look of the other entries. *In blood?*

Pulling out a wicked looking curved knife, Lucien took Fale's left hand and said, "Repeat after me."

"Okay," Fale silently linked her right hand with Keron's.

"I hereby promise my allegiance to my coterie, to the sage and the masters. I will use my gifts to the benefit of all dimensions. I swear to protect the family at all costs from any and all persecution. So help me, according to the stars."

Fale repeated the words, then Lucien sliced the knife into her left palm.

"What're you doing?" Keron jumped up from the sofa.

"I require her thumbprint. In blood."

Fale pressed her thumb to her palm and made a print on the paper next to her name. Keron turned to get a towel for Fale's hand, but Lucien put up a hand to stop him.

"I will heal her, son." Lucien ran a hand over her palm and it reappeared without a wound.

"How'd you do that?" Keron asked.

"Healing magic," Lucien explained. He looked to Fale. "Would you like to bathe before we begin, child? Are you comfortable?" He looked at her loose taupe shirt and drawstring pants and smiled at her clothing choice.

"I'm fine," she said. "Just excited."

Lucien set out several plates on the coffee table. He began to lay piles of rock on each of them with a disc of charcoal on top of each. "It's incense," he said. "Rose, jasmine and

sandalwood. Why don't you lay back and get comfortable? Young man, you could hold her head. This may be difficult. In fact, this is your highest privilege as wardsman, to guard her while she is vulnerable from using her magic."

Fale lay with her head on Keron's muscled thigh, while he brushed stray hairs out of her face. Her feet lay on the other arm of the couch. After Lucien conjured a flame for each plate, the charcoal sparked and burned red hot, searing the air all around them with the pungent aroma.

"Relax," Lucien said. "Feel the energy around you. Your magic is natural- it is in nature. We are surrounded by life out here. Lay your hands on your stomach, palms up, and direct your energy there."

"You're doing well," Lucien said to Keron, who was stroking the worry line in Fale's brow.

"I've tried this before and I felt warm, but nothing happens." Fale said.

"Close your eyes and tell me when your palms feel very warm."

Lucien waited while the smells permeated the room. He spoke some words Fale thought might be in Crion, like the language Lisle used, but instead of floating, she began to fall deeper into her body. Fale's focus became so clear, it hurt her head. She gritted her teeth against the pain, but felt the heat of Keron's hands massage her jaw until she released it.

Fale tried to find a place in herself where magic would hide. She searched her mind, attempting to think it out. She felt warmth in her core so she focused on her belly. She was no closer to doing it herself when she stopped to breathe deeply and let it all go. Fale was giving up, she stopped trying and melted in Keron's hands. That was when her toes began to tingle, all her extremities began to tingle. She repeated the words Lucien was saying now and she felt an energy building in her body.

Fale felt her body get lighter, as if she were floating and her arms automatically opened,



her palms still facing up. She felt, rather than saw, Lucien come to stand over her. She opened her eyes in slits to see him holding an orb between his hands made of blue light. She closed her eyes again as she felt heat begin in her shoulders. White hot streaks rushed down her arms, and when her hands got warm she said, "Now."

Lucien's hand slammed the orb into Fale's heart, and her body arched off the couch stiffly. As Keron was about to say something, Fale opened her eyes and white light shot out of her hands like rays from the sun. It was more than a flame. Fire burned like twin pillars for minutes and Fale cried out. She was afraid of herself. The rush of power surged through her like lightening. It burned every vein in her arms.

"How do I stop it?" She cried, tears streaming down her face. Keron was helpless to do anything but hold her and wipe her tears.

"You have to stop it," Lucien said forcefully. "It's your power. Feel it. Remember where it came from so you can call it again. Then reign it back." The flames continued to burn blue and white in rushing streams from her palms.

"I can't," she sobbed, closing her eyes.

"We can," Keron said.

Fale opened her eyes to see into his sky-blue depths and said, "Please, help me."

She could see Keron's heart breaking; he didn't know how to change this. His whole existence was built on fixing things and he couldn't fix this. Keron instinctively pressed his left hand onto Fale's heart as Lucien had done. "Look here, love. Just try."

Fale felt the weight of Keron's hand and focused on the sudden rush of power she'd channeled when Lucien had added his magic to hers. It had unlocked an inactive part of her spirit. She held onto the feeling of Keron as she grabbed onto the pillars of fire like rope and followed them inside her to their source. Always a master of her emotions, now her feelings were

spiraling out of control. She felt a need to cry and laugh at the same time. Tears streamed down her face. Fale pulled back, calmed down, sucked the power in like she had a straw. Her stomach tightened and her body sunk back into the couch.

“It’s working, Fale,” Keron said. Fale looked at her hands to see the flames turning blue, orange and red. She continued to pull it back, imagining putting it in a box, deep within herself.

Panting heavily, Fale closed her hands. Her fists glowed yellow, but she put the flames out. “I did it,” she breathed. “I did it.”

“You did,” Lucien agreed. Keron wiped her hair from her damp forehead.

Fale lay still for several minutes. Then she asked, “So how do I know what gifts I have?”

“Those flames could do some damage as a scorching weapon, if you can learn to control them,” Keron said.

“But I mean, what makes me special?” She sat up. “I want a super- ability. Like healing or invisibility or flying.”

Lucien looked at her strangely, “You have no idea how special you are. Your other gifts, however, will be revealed to you through the Ondah.”

“What’s that?” she asked.

Lucien reached into his bag and pulled out a shallow golden dish, decorated on the outside with an assortment of jewels. It was beautiful in its antiquity. “This is the Ondah. It is used in awakening rituals. Your powers are already inside you; they simply need to be aroused. Make sure you are with your wardsman, or someone you trust implicitly to guard you. Then, fill the disc with any clear liquid. When you examine it, the Ondah will show you your true spirit. You will know what to do.”

Fale took the Ondah from Lucien, “Thank you.”

“Practice your powers. Soon you will be able to heal on your own.”

“How do you know?”

“I have a gift of insight,” Lucien began.

“I was afraid of that,” she said.

“And the gift of healing. Give me your injured hand, Fale. You’ll be needing it.” He took Fale’s right hand and it warmed comfortably. “There. I think you’re good. Now, I should go,” Lucien said.

“Wait,” Fale pleaded. “I know you know my gifts. Can’t you tell me something else?”

“I will tell you this, my queen, there is not much you can’t do.”

*My Queen?*

Then Lucien stood up and walked out, leaving Fale and Keron on the couch.

“I guess he knew we needed to rest for a minute,” Fale joked.

“You okay?” Keron asked.

“Fine. I can’t tell if I want to go train or if I’m exhausted.”

“Let me see your hand.”

She placed her bandage wrapped lump in his palm and let him unwrap it. The bandages unveiled a perfect hand, Fale’s fingers long and thin, with no infection or swelling. Keron twined his fingers with hers. “You sure you need me anymore?”

“More than ever,” she said.

“How often do you think you can do that? Throw flames?”

“As much as I have to, I guess,” she said.

“I’m not ready to watch it again.”

“Don’t worry,” Fale touched his face.

“Need a nap?” he asked.

“I might, but I’d rather be with you.” She felt raw from the magic and didn’t want to be alone. She was tired, but she felt exposed and needed his strength.

Keron pulled Fale over in front of him and swung his legs up on the couch behind her. “We can do that,” he said. Wrapping his valezsan alloy arm around her, his bicep under her head, he pulled her back to him.

Fale sighed deeply. “Later, I really need to let Izzy know where I am. She’s always worried, like my little mother. I don’t know how to tell her any of this. She’ll never believe it.”

“Maybe Izzy can help you with your disguise,” Keron offered.

“You don’t like my disguise?” Fale was shocked.

“I like your disguise too much, and so will any other man who sees you in it,” Keron said darkly. “It’s kinda the opposite idea of a disguise.”

“Oh really?” Fale teased, wiggling innocently against him.

“Fale, are you trying to drive me crazy? I don’t think you know what you’re doing, but I’m not a saint.”

She thought about what he said. She really didn’t know what he was talking about. She had no idea how to act sensuously with a man. She had been training at the TacTrac since she was five and working there since she moved in with Nelson. She didn’t know about anything else. She’d taken classes there until the University. Nelson had told her about how babies were made, but he didn’t tell her how good a kiss would make her *feel*. He’d made it sound like something so far into her future, she’d possibly never experience romance at all. Fale thought about Nelson; she missed him so badly, he’d been all she’d ever needed as a girl. He probably meant to shelter her. For many reasons, his life would have been easier, simpler, with Fale never knowing about her feelings. The unfairness of it hit her. Why hadn’t anyone told her what lived inside her? First

her father, not revealing her gifts, then Nelson not giving her the full truth about love, then at fifteen Keron not giving her a chance to find out what her own feelings were. Fale wanted more. She wanted to know what she was missing.

“I’m not a saint, either,” Fale said. “I’m just a girl.” She took his hand and laid it on the bare skin of her stomach, to feel the delicious touch of skin on skin. She made a small sound of contentment.

Keron was stiff for a minute, then he splayed his fingers across her abdomen, only to bring his hand closed. He did it again and again, his fingertips touching her with infinite softness. Fale didn’t think she would, but she fell asleep to the massaging motion on her belly.

~\*~

Keron wondered what had caused her to be so bold for someone as naïve as Fale. He decided to ask her later. If she was thinking he required more of her, he would have to set her straight; but if she needed more of him... the thought stirred his blood more than he thought it would.

## CHAPTER II

Once Fale had woken Keron, who swore he wasn't asleep, they ate and planned to go to Izzy's. "For all I know, Izzy's the one who called Control when I went missing," Fale said. "I need to let her know I'm okay."

"I know. You don't have to explain to me, Fale."

They disguised themselves and slinked into the city, going immediately to Izzy's apartment. "Who's there?" she called.

"It's me," Fale whispered furiously. "Open up, Iz."

Izzy yanked the door open, "Fale!" She hugged her friend, pulling her in the door. "Oh, hey, Keron."

"Hey Iz." He chuckled.

"It's about time you brought my girl over here," Izzy admonished.

Fale took a deep breath. "Actually, Izzy, I need to talk to you." She looked over to the bed. "Oh. Lisle. What are you doing here? Are we interrupting?"

Izzy snorted, laughing. "Lisle and me?" Lisle looked so guilty, Fale couldn't help but think she was missing something.

"Lisle?" Fale prodded.

"She made me, Fale. I'm sorry. I told her everything. I told you I can't lie to Izzy."

"Yeah," Izzy said. "About that..."

"I never told him to lie to you, Iz. Just to give me a couple of days."

"Well, princess," Izzy put her hands on her hips, "it was sucky of you. As well as keeping

all this a secret from me. Didn't you trust me?"

"Of course I do, Iz. It's so crazy. Would you have believed me?"

"Probably not. Until Nelson went missing and Control came looking for you. I'm not sure I really believe all of it yet. How are you out here in public?"

Fale held up her wristband, "Meet Bryla Palmquist. Nelson got them for Keron and me from the mages. They're hiding us. We need better disguises, though. Could you maybe change our hair color?"

"Oooh." Izzy clapped. "A double makeover. You talk to Lisle, I'll go to the store and be right back."

"We have credits," Fale said.

"Save it for when you're disguised. Then you won't have to hide so much," Izzy said. "Daddy still gives me credits without telling mother."

Fale laughed. Izzy took her jacket from the peg by the door and dashed away. Keron sat on Izzy's lumpy fold-out couch, and motioned to Fale. She looked at Izzy's bed and Lisle's bowed head and fidgeting hands. "Lisle," she drew his name out. "Why do you look like that?"

He lifted his blond head and chocolate brown eyes. "Like what?" he asked hopefully.

"Guilty," Keron said from across the room. Fale nodded in agreement.

Lisle sighed. "I got a promotion of sorts. I went up in rank, because of all my additional work. Then, in the event I heard from any of my 'missing friends,' I should make a report because Control was involved. My allegiance has also earned me some knowledge," he said.

"What do you mean?" Fale asked coming closer.

"When I described the encounter you had with the boy, Taran, the grassy field, the castle and machines, Gasten and the masters knew I was talking about Garrith. So, they let me sit in on

a council meeting. Gasten called Effailya's followers 'despicable vermin.' He hates them, but I don't know why. He absorbs their magic as long as they are in captivity. He just continues the enchantment that's been over them all this time. He has no idea how to actually steal someone's power with an original spell. So, they have sent the machines to enslave the growing number of Effailya's people."

"We knew, Lisle," Fale said sadly.

"But did you know Nelson has been sent there?"

"What?" Fale walked to Lisle and gripped his shoulders. "Is he a machine?"

"What?" Lisle asked taking her hands and holding them.

"The machines are people, Lisle," Keron said. "At least they used to be."

"How?" Lisle asked.

"You don't want to know, man. It's a whole-body transition. That's got to be painful." Keron looked at his own biomechanical arm and leg, and winced. He opened and closed his fists, flesh and wire.

"It's frightening- and fascinating. What do they look like? Have you seen them?" Lisle leaned forward a little.

"I have," Fale said. "They're massive. Of course, they're built taller, thicker, and stronger than they were as humans. They are like an army of monsters. I have to get Nelson out of there as soon as possible."

"They didn't say if Nelson had undergone surgery. They only mentioned he wouldn't be a problem in getting to you anymore," Lisle told Fale, rubbing his thumbs over her knuckles. "I don't even know if they're using me right now by telling you, but I'm done being used. I don't want to be a part of slavery, death, and evil. It's all for more power."

"What will you do? You can't leave," Fale asked.



“I’ll stay there, but I’ll try to get information for our side.”

“Our side?” Keron narrowed one eye at Lisle’s hands.

“Yeah, I’m on your side.” Lisle jumped a little and let go of Fale.

“Are you okay betraying your brotherhood?” She asked him.

“Well, it’s better than betraying innocent people who are being turned into slaves and machines without a choice, because someone needs to rule like a king.” Lisle fumed with agitation.

Fale looked to Keron. “It’s as good a reason as any, I guess.”

Izzy returned with three packages of hair dye and a large bag of folded clothing. “Who’s first?” she asked brightly.

“Keron is,” Fale said. “I still want to talk to Lisle.” Keron looked from Fale to Lisle and frowned.

“Come on,” Izzy said. “Let’s use my bathroom. It’s huge, grab that chair.” She took Keron by his vazezan elbow joint and tugged. They left the room and Fale sat next to Lisle.

“Are you really okay?” she asked, placing a hand on his bicep. Lisle’s face turned red, but he didn’t jerk his arm away.

“I will be. It feels like being stabbed in the back. I gave my loyalty to the brotherhood, expecting them to be good and they’re evil. Who does that to people? We’re supposed to be wise,” Lisle lamented.

“I’m so sorry, Lisle.” Fale soothed his feelings as she gently circled her hand on his arm.

“How are you and Keron doing? Is he making you miserable yet?” Lisle snickered.

Fale smiled. “He hasn’t been bad. We’re staying in tight quarters, so we kind of have to get

along.”

“Oh.” Disappointment flashed across Lisle’s face. “Have you been back to Garrith?”

“And have Keron meet Taran? Are you kidding? I think that would be a disaster.”

“Why?”

“I can’t see Keron being okay with me becoming Taran at particular times.” She blushed.

“I see,” Lisle said. “Are you two together?”

“We haven’t talked about it. I don’t know. I’ve never done this whole relationship thing before, Lisle.”

“But you like him?”

“Yes. Of course, I do. You do, too,” Fale evaded.

“You know what I mean.”

She laughed. “Yeah. He’s been my hero. He takes care of me when things happen. Oh! That’s what I meant to tell you.”

“What?”

“What happened this morning. I found the root of my power. It was brilliant and terrifying. I scorched the ceiling with white flames.”

“Can you do it again?” Lisle asked. He looked like a little boy being given a prize.

“I can try.” Fale held out one hand and summoned a flame. She touched her heart with two fingers of the other hand and focused on the magic. She smiled when she felt her shoulder heat up and began to reign herself in as the liquid warmth ran down her arm. A green flame erupted from Fale’s palm eight inches tall. “Why is it green?” she asked.

“The color green generally means tranquility or peace,” Lisle offered. “Maybe your flame is cognitive.”

“How so?”

“Your magic reads the people or situation around you and your flame glows in the color that defines it.”

“I don’t know what the colors mean,” Fale said.

“I do,” Lisle said. “I’ll teach you.” They both leaned over her flame as she pulled it back to a burning disc of color in her palm. Their heads touched. “If you can make a flame like this in certain situations, your magic could lead you out of danger.”

“Could it help me find someone?” she asked.

“Who are you looking for? Nelson’s in Garrith.”

“I want to find whoever took him. They have answers. I know they do, they will know where the machine is. I need it now more than ever.”

“If you can sense evil with your flame, you could be sure you’re on the right trail. But please be careful, Fale. The wizards’ magic is just as real as yours, but darker.”

“I will. Thanks, Lisle, for helping.”

“I would never let you down.” Lisle spent the next half hour teaching Fale about the meaning of color in magic.

“Ta da,” Izzy crowed.

Fale and Lisle looked up, Lisle’s hand lightly cupping hers, and they pulled apart quickly. Keron looked at Lisle with a murderous glare.

Keron stood in the doorway, his mechanical parts covered in a blue checkered button-up and navy slacks, topped by a headful of thick black hair. Izzy had died his brows, and his torch blue eyes were luminous.

“Wow,” Fale said appreciatively. “Looks good on you.”

Izzy stepped between them to haul Fale to her feet and head to the bathroom. "It's a great disguise," she agreed. "No one will recognize you."

"Good," Keron said. "Cause I'm going to go buy a bottle of whiskey."

"Why don't you get something for all of us?" Fale asked, oblivious to his black mood. "Lisle can go with you."

"Do you have a new name, too?" Izzy asked.

Keron looked at Fale, who shook her head imperceptibly. "It's Brock," he said sourly.

"You look like a Brock now," Lisle offered. "Surely they didn't leave your last name the same."

"No." He looked at Fale again. "It's Palmquist."

"Like Fale..." Izzy said.

"Are you supposed to be related?" Lisle joked.

"She's my wife," Keron said.

"Oh no," Fale sighed. "Here we go."

"She's your what?" Izzy and Lisle echoed each other in astonishment.

"Our new bands have not only changed our identities, they um, they make us legally married," Fale explained.

"I need a drink," Lisle murmured.

"Like I said..." Keron rolled his head on his shoulders.

"Okay boys, go to the store. We'll work on Fale and we'll toast the transformation when you get back," Izzy commanded. "Then we need a plan."

"Who's we?" Keron asked.

“All of us,” Izzy said. “We’re a team. I am supporting this girl, and she’s stuck with you, and Lisle is our information source. All of us.”

Keron hit his forehead with his palm and closed his eyes, but he said, “Fine. If it’s what Fale wants.”

*What I want is a time machine.*

“Sure,” she said.

After the guys left, Izzy put Fale in a robe in her bathroom chair. “Whoa, that is a wicked knife.” Izzy pointed to Fale’s enchanted dagger in its thigh sheath.

“Yeah, it was a gift from Lisle.”

“No wonder he makes Keron crazy.”

“What?”

“You are so blind.” Izzy shook her head.

“What?” Fale repeated.

“Never mind. Really,” Izzy said. “They were short on colors at the corner store so I got black for Keron and white for you.”

“What do you mean white? Like blonde?”

“No, like shimmery, snowy white. It was all they had other than hot pink, and we were at least trying for real hair colors here.”

“Next time choose hot pink,” Fale said.

“Noted.”

Izzy made the mixture from two packages and plastered Fale’s long hair. “Now we wait,”

Izzy directed. "Tell me about what's going on with your *husband*?"

"He's been so willing to help me. I get so confused. I should be centered on finding Nelson, keeping the key safe, training, but when he kisses me..."

"He kisses you?"

"Yeah." Fale grinned.

"You have the same goofy smile as the other day. How long has this been going on?"

"Not long, Izzy, really. It's moving so fast."

"Has he tried anything you're not comfortable with?" Izzy asked protectively.

"No, nothing like that. I accused him of still not liking me and he kissed me like his soul was blazing. It felt right, Iz."

"You're gonna make me cry or puke, I'm not sure which."

"Thanks. I mean it. But I need more reassurance, after three years of blowing me off, than some hot kissing and fighting together... He's been beaten up for my information, and he's been hiding us from bad guys and holding me while I sleep and fixing my injuries. I guess, he *has* been giving me more, I just haven't seen it."

"Doesn't sound like Keron," Izzy said.

"Exactly. I've gotten to know him," Fale said. "It's so easy for me to doubt people. I've been taught to take care of myself."

"So, what is the plan?" Izzy checked the timer.

"For Keron? Or what?" Fale asked.

"First Keron, then tell me where you're staying, and what we do next?"

"I am taking Keron day by day. Now we can get into the city, we need information. If Nelson is in Garrith, then I *must* set the people free, and to do that we need to find the machine."

“You weren’t in the city?” Izzy asked. “Where have you been?”

“I don’t know how much you should know, Iz, but if you ever feel like you’re in danger I want you to go there. It’s a little house in the marsh to the north east of the city, not far from the plant, but on the other side of the molten river,” Fale said.

“If it gets too sketchy, I’ll make Lisle take me there. You know, Control has been here *twice* looking for you?”

“Yeah, they think I’m a criminal.”

“How do you know?”

“One of them scanned me and I almost got caught.”

“My stars, Fale. Where was Keron?”

“Fighting. Trying to get information.”

“And he didn’t get caught?” Izzy tilted her head to the side.

“He entered as Brock and fought underground in the small, late night fights between volunteers. It wasn’t a ring fight, with the big gamblers. Just the late- night crews, letting off steam. No one keeps track of those, or so Keron tells me,” Fale volunteered. “But now he won’t be recognized, so it might be easier, as long as he stays away from the big rings.”

“Is that why his face looks like a giant bruise? No rules in the small fights, but no killing, either. I thought you guys met somebody with a weapon.”

“He said he had other things on his mind...” They both laughed.

Hearing the front door slam shut, Izzy checked her timer again, and checked Fale’s hair. “Not yet,” she said. “I’ll go get us drinks, you wait here.”

Fale waited patiently for ten minutes before calling, “Izzy, what’s going on?” Izzy came back looking flustered, a drink in each hand.

“What is it?”

Izzy handed Fale a glass, “The guys are back. Here, drink this, then I’ll tell you.”

Fale warily drank the whole thing while Izzy slammed hers, obviously looking for liquid courage. “Spill, Izzy.” Fale handed back her glass.

“I’ll just refill these.”

“Izzy Jayn. Stop where you are.” Fale warned.

“You can’t use the first-middle name combo in situations of duress.”

“Yes, I can.”

Izzy wiped her forehead and lay her hand over her eyes. “The liquor store has papers out looking for you. They say you and Keron are responsible for Nelson’s murder.”

“What the f—” Izzy covered Fale’s mouth. Fale shook her off. “You don’t think he’s really dead, do you? I mean, do you think they have a body?”

“No, I think he’s gone missing,” Izzy used air quotes, “and they need to pin his disappearance on you, to make you a wanted criminal. It makes people afraid of you, and more likely to turn you in.”

“It’s messed up,” Fale shook her head slowly.

“Yeah, we know.” Izzy said. “Now I’m going to refill these.”

Fale sat in shock.

*Nelson’s not really dead, is he? Lisle said he was in Garrith, but what if he’s a machine? A living robot? Would his body be considered dead? Would he be stripped of his humanity? Would he even know who I am? I don’t know.*

“Lisle,” she called. There was arguing outside the bathroom, then Lisle popped his head in.

“Yes?”



“How soon can we contact Taran? I need him to look for Nelson. I have to know if he’s a machine or not.”

“Whenever you’re ready,” he said.

“I’m ready now.”

“I don’t think Taran would be comfortable in this situation, Fale.”

“Oh, I hadn’t thought of that,” she said. “We’ll make a plan, then.”

“Fine with me. I’m glad you like my gift.” He nodded to her exposed sheath and ducked out.

Fale fixed her robe, and thought about what her next move should be. She would need to get more information on the princess, or was it queen Effailya? She didn’t know, but it was important to practice her powers and find out what kind of gifts she and Effailya had. The mages most likely had information, but Lisle wanted to help so bad, perhaps she should have him find it. It would give him something to do.

Izzy came back with more drinks. “Let’s get tipsy,” she said, obviously halfway there. “Your man nearly beat Lisle to death when he got up to come into the bathroom. Then he heard Lisle comment about a gift and slammed back several shots. You might be here awhile. Which gift?” Fale flashed the dagger. “Oh, I think Lisle has an ornery streak.”

Fale laughed. “He likes to bait Keron. And Keron rises to it every time because his heart is... black and white. He agrees or he doesn’t. He always knows what he wants. Not like me. I see everybody’s side of things, but I can’t seem to make a stand anywhere.”

“It makes you understanding, Fale, and compassionate. It’s not a bad thing,” Izzy said.

Fale tipped back her cocktail. “He even knows my favorite things without asking, Iz. I never have to ask for anything when I’m with Keron.”

“I forgot you’re a sappy drunk,” Izzy said sourly. “Let’s check your hair. It’s been like an

hour.”

They rinsed out Fale’s hair thoroughly. “Am I done?” Fale asked.

“Nope. Now you have to put on the toner for thirty minutes,” Izzy instructed.

“This chair is making my butt fall asleep,” Fale exclaimed.

“Beauty is pain,” Izzy said.

When Izzy finished Fale’s hair, she pulled out a silk kimono. “What is that?” Fale asked.

“It’s a dress, dummy.”

*Not for me.*

“It’s nice, Iz, but I can’t fight in a dress.”

“You don’t have to, Bryla. In fact, you shouldn’t.” Izzy held it up. “Come on. Humor me.”

The dress fit Fale beautifully. It was royal blue silk, which set off her new hair brilliantly. Light pink and white blossoms covered the fabric, and a gorgeous ice blue obi went across her middle as a sash. The silk glided over her body like a spring breeze from the mountains. Izzy pulled it tightly across Fale so she wouldn’t have too many folds of fabric to deal with. She was overwhelmed with gratitude toward Izzy for helping her. “Thank you,” she said gratefully. “You know so much fabric makes me crazy.”

The sleeves went to Fale’s mid forearm and fell to her knees, brushing the silk on her legs. The dress emphasized her hourglass figure with a tie in the middle decorated by a silver flower with a royal blue stone in the center.

When Fale saw herself in the mirror she said, “Oh, Izzy. It’s gorgeous. You’ve made me too lovely, now people will notice me for sure. I won’t be able to hide.” A tiny tear lay on her lashes.

Izzy said, “Stop it. You’ll make me cry.” Izzy opened the bathroom door and shouted, “Ta

da.”

Fale walked to the door tentatively. The first face she saw was Lisle’s and his mouth was open. *So far so good.* Then she lit on Keron who was standing and walking towards her with a serious look on his face. She couldn’t tell, was it good or bad? Izzy smiled and moved over by Lisle. Keron came to Fale and took the additional step that pressed his body into hers, pushing her into the bathroom and shutting the door.

“Do you like it?” Her voice shook.

“Like it so much, I wanna take it off.”

*Ooh. He likes it.*

“What about my hair?” She led.

Keron put his hands in it and gently pulled her head back. “Amazing. So soft.” He whispered against her mouth. Fale ran her fingernails through his now raven colored hair and down to his neck.

“Kiss me,” she said.

“Gladly.” He wrapped his arms around her and picked her up, setting her on the bathroom counter to make them more even-heighted. She laughed and threw her arms around his neck, kissing him again.

Keron moved closer and his valezsan leg hit the cabinets with a loud thunk. “What’s going on in there?” Izzy asked. “That’s enough. Come out of my bathroom.”

When Fale laughed, Izzy repeated, “Fale Valine, get out here.”

“Okay, okay,” Fale called.

“You don’t have to go just because Izzy tells you,” Keron said.

“It’s something we made up when we started hanging out, because I had no mom and hers

was always gone. If we use the first-middle name combo, then we must do it. It's mostly for our own good," she explained.

"Wish I'd known that when I was trying to get you to jump off the balcony." They attempted quiet laughter.

"Help me down?" Fale asked.

"Sure." Keron slid his hands to her waist, causing her to shiver, and lifted her down.

Opening the bathroom door, Fale noticed how red Lisle's face was as he looked down. She hadn't meant to make anyone uncomfortable and she felt bad. "Do you think we pass the anonymous test?" she asked.

"I think I should go into a beauty business." Izzy said.

"Unrecognizable," Lisle affirmed.

"We need to strategize, buy some food, then go back to the house." Fale said, turning to Keron.

"What's the next step then?" Keron asked. "We really gonna drag Izzy and Lisle into this?"

"Lisle's already involved," Fale began.

"And you can't keep me from joining this party," Izzy declared with hands on her hips.

"Izzy is my self-appointed defender," Fale said to Keron.

"Someone has to be. She has too much compassion and no common sense," Izzy said.

"Thanks," Fale said facetiously.

"I'm going to find out more about the princess and Garrith for Fale." Lisle said.

“We need the machine to get everyone out of Garrith, too. It’s what the legend says,” Keron replied.

“Gasten must have it if he’s sending people there. Lisle, can you dig around for that, too?” Fale asked.

“If I can,” he said. “I don’t want to look too curious.”

“Do you think they suspect you?” Fale fretted.

“It’s impossible to know what they see and what their plan is,” he said.

“Do they know you’re here?” Izzy asked. “Could we be trapped?”

“Not helping, Iz,” Keron said.

“This might be too much, Lisle.” Fale worried about Lisle’s safety. Asking so many questions to the wizards could tip them off and put Lisle in the most dangerous role of all.

“I don’t think I was followed,” Lisle said. “Gasten is personally interested in me because of you; he’ll talk to me. If he feels like I am being loyal, he’ll bring me in on the plan, if I offer to deliver you.”

“Absolutely not,” Keron stated.

“I won’t do it. I’ll just say I am. But then you guys have to hide me when I don’t come through,” Lisle explained.

“You can stay here as long as you need to,” Izzy offered.

“We’ll hide you,” Fale said.

“Where?” Keron asked her.

“We still have the couch. He can sleep on it,” Fale said to him.

“Fine,” Keron agreed. “But if this gets even close to dangerous for you- I’m putting a stop to it.”

“Yes sir.” She saluted him.

“You’re not her father,” Lisle said irritably. “She is good at fending for herself.”

“She needs his help, Lisle,” Izzy interjected before Keron could say any of the things on his mind.

“Maybe it is time to go,” Fale said. She hugged Izzy and kissed her cheek. “Thank you for making us over.”

“Don’t leave me in the dark,” Izzy said. “Let’s meet here in two days. Does that give you enough time, Lisle?”

“I should have something by then. And Fale and I need to contact Taran.”

“Great. We’ll be here,” Fale took her bag and Keron’s arm. “Bye, guys.” They left with Keron still fuming.

## CHAPTER 12

Fale and Keron hoped their new disguises would prevent them from attracting attention. They were wrong. In fact, they made a striking couple. Handsome and lovely, valezsan and flesh, black and white. They bought what they could easily carry and headed back to the house as quickly as they could.

Keron opened the door for Fale and stepped aside. "Thank you," she said, slipping off her boots and going to the kitchen to unload groceries.

"Mmm hmm," he mumbled, watching her walk.

Fale laughed lightly. "If you stare at me anymore, I might disappear in a puff of smoke or something."

"Can't help it." He came up behind her, helping her set her grocery bags down, then his own. "Izzy did such a good job on your hair. And I've never seen you in a dress."

"There's a reason for that," Fale chided. "I can't fight in a dress."

"Bet you can."

"How much?" Fale felt the pressure of their situation, but shoved it to the back of her mind. She needed a break from the worry and stress being laid on her. So, she played along with Keron to lighten the mood.

Keron's brows shot up. "You're a betting girl? Okay, say a nice back massage when you're done showing me."

"You mean now?" she asked.

"There's no better time," he said. "Plus, watching you with swords is sexy."

Fale laughed nervously. "All right. We'll eat and then I'll prove to you I *cannot* fight in a dress. And then I win."

"As you desire." Keron bowed to her.

They made spaghetti in tomato sauce with Fale's fresh bread and salad. It was the best meal they'd eaten in a week. Fale sat back with the biggest smile and said, "You do the dishes while I clean my blades."

"Can do," Keron agreed.

Fale went into the living room and got out her swords from where she'd stashed them behind the couch. She wiped and oiled them, taking the utmost care. This time, without injury, her hand held steady. Fale inspected her weapons and stood up to make a few practice swings. She thought her sleeves would be in the way, but the silk flowed gracefully down her body.

She took a wide step and her kimono gave her room until she kicked, then it opened at its split, exposing her leg. Keron came into the room. "No starting without me."

"Fine," Fale said.

Fale waited until he settled in comfortably on the couch before she knocked the coffee table out of the way. She proceeded to perform one of her more intricate combative dances, expecting to get caught up in the material; but as she sliced and swung, her dress clung to her every move. She imagined the battle she would have with the machines to rescue Nelson. Anger stirred her blood.

*They can't take everything from me. These wizards have taken enough.*

First her mother, and her father, now her freedom and Nelson. She would find him. She would find him and destroy the barbarity of Gasten's regime. Nelson would know her. Even if he was a machine, he would know her, and he would come with her. She hoped. She fought and swung and spun. Then Fale kicked high, exposing her dagger sheath, and planted her foot in



front of him, bare to the thigh.

“See,” she panted, “I cannot fight... in a dress... I’m exposed.”

“You most certainly can. You would definitely distract your enemy, too. You probably should. It would make you an easier target and people would underestimate you.”

“But, but... it didn’t work,” she cried.

“Sure did. I win,” he said smugly.

“Fine,” Fale pouted, warning him, “but I hate losing.”

“I see that,” Keron chuckled.

“Turn around. I owe you a massage.”

“Let’s worry about it later,” he said.

Fale put her swords away and they decided to play a few hands of cards before bed. “You wanna bet on cards, too?” Keron teased.

“Shut up,” Fale said, smiling.

“Just checking.” He grinned.

After a while Fale yawned deeply. “Looks like I’d better get you to bed,” Keron said. “We still have a bet to settle.”

Fale groaned. Keron smothered a laugh. He put out the lanterns while Fale went into the bedroom to change into her pajamas. She smoothed down the material. Why did she feel so awkward? It was just Keron. She was safe with him.

He waited until he heard her getting into the bed before he went in and knew Fale would close her eyes while he stripped and put on cotton pants. But when he looked down at the bed, she was laying on her side, watching him. He was going to joke with her, but the look of innocent need on her face made his mouth go dry.

He knew that look, but he doubted she knew how she felt. How many girls had he seen in his bed, and yet he felt like this was the first time he'd ever been so exposed. He stood next to the bed bathed in moonlight from the window.

"Your body is so beautiful," she said. His jaw flexed, like he was going to say something, but instead he got into the bed and pulled her close to him.

"Thank you," he said, suddenly very serious, and met her gaze with an intensity that surprised her.

"Why?" she asked.

"You make me feel whole. Like a real man and not a machine. Not a possession."

"You are a real man," she insisted.

"Ah, Fale. You don't know how that makes me feel."

"I think I do," she said with sincerity. "Should we settle our bet?"

*I want to touch you.*

"Sure. Roll over."

"But I'm supposed to massage you," she said. "I lost."

"Nope," he said. "It was going to be you, either way."

She laughed. "How about me tonight, you tomorrow?"

"I agree," he said.

Fale rolled over and Keron's hands began to knead her shoulders. After all her tension and magic, she hadn't realized how much she needed this. His fingertips dug into her shoulder blades and circled. She moaned. He walked his hands down her spine and up to her neck where he gripped each side and rubbed in more circles.

Fale, needing more, reached down and pulled off her shirt to give him better access to her

skin. She held her shirt across her chest and crossed her arms. Keron stopped. "Fale. I need to ask you something."

"Mmm hmm," she said. "Just keep going."

He tentatively touched the soft skin of her bare back, feeling her ribs, and running his hands up to her shoulders to knead the flesh there. "Do you think I need you to go farther, um, sexually to stay interested?"

"No," she said, then it occurred to her that he might. She panicked. "Wait. Do you?"

"No," he assured her. "I'm fine with waiting for you, I just want you to know what you're doing."

"I do. I want to feel everything I've missed," she said.

"Missed?"

"Yeah, what I've been denied. No man has ever touched me and my skin needs to be next to someone else's. I've missed a lot of years, training to be a warrior and forgetting I'm a girl," she explained.

"Where do you want to be touched?" he whispered next to her ear, causing her arms to have goosebumps. She rolled to face him, pressing her stomach against his.

"Anywhere," she whispered back. "Everywhere. I don't pretend to know what I'm doing, Keron. I am blind. I'm feeling my way through this." She ran her hands along his chest and kissed his jaw.

"You. Are. Killing me, Fale," he said, sighing. "Lay back on the pillows and I'll touch your skin, but then you're going to sleep."

She lay back, nervous and yet excited. Keron's fingers stroked every exposed piece of her flesh, and followed with a few kisses in delightful places. Fale moaned with contentment. "She's killing me," Keron repeated to himself, making Fale laugh.

Satisfied that he had flustered her almost to the point of himself, Keron stopped and gathered Fale into his arms. "Okay, sleep now."

"But I'm not tired," she complained.

"I have to stop, Fale," he said sternly.

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"You don't have to be sorry, Sprout. It was good. Right? You're not ready for more."

"It *was* good. And I think I do want more," she breathed. "I mean, what if Lisle offers me to Gasten and they turn me into a machine and I never have skin again?"

"Good grief, Fale. Really? Do you know what you do to me? I won't let them take you. I will never let you lose to him, understand me?"

"Okay, but will you show me everything I haven't felt yet?"

"Fale. Nelson will kill me. You are young still and can choose anyone to do this with. I'm a bondsman, you're a princess. There's probably a rule..." he said.

"I don't care. I chose you. Lucien knew it. Why do you think he set us up this way, making you my husband?"

Keron groaned. "Okay, wife, if it's what you want, but not tonight. Shut your eyes and go to sleep now."

Fale smiled in triumph and rounded herself into the curve of his body.

The next day Fale woke up in only her boxers, with Keron's arm thrown across her ribs, under her breasts. Her face lit up with fire. *Fale, you're too brazen. No*, she told herself. She wouldn't be afraid of what she desired with Keron anymore. They could never get married to anyone else or even each other, because legally, they were already wed. She was going to know

what it felt like to be a wife, and it made her insanely happy. She moved and woke him. “Good morning,” She said. “We have all day together. Wanna make flatcakes and sneak into the gym? We have to keep you in fighting shape. Besides, I feel invincible today.”

Keron looked at Fale and his eyes opened wider when she didn’t move to cover herself. “Um, sure.” He began to pull his arm back across her body, stopping to fan his hand out on her chest. She breathed deeply. Regretfully, he dragged his hand away. Fale got up to use the bathroom.

“Please, please, please put your shirt back on,” Keron called after her. Fale laughed.

They made a big breakfast of artificial eggs and flatcakes. “Do you think they’d recognize me at the TacTrac?”

“Are there many strangers coming and going?”

“Not really. Most people are in classes of some kind. They come regularly and get to know each other. We’re like a family,” she said.

“Then I’d say, don’t go. They’ll see a beautiful white haired stranger standing out, then realize it’s you.”

“Maybe they wouldn’t tell on me.”

“Maybe they’d have to,” he said.

“True,” she said sadly. “They loved Nelson, too. They’d hate me for killing him.”

“Hey. He’s not gone forever. We’ll get him back,” Keron assured. “Come with me to the downtown gym. We can work out together.”

“Okay.” She smiled.

They finished eating and changed. Keron took a backpack and they trekked into the city.

At the edge of the reeds, they found a board Keron had left for them and changed from boots to tennis shoes, leaving their boots to dry.

Fale and Keron jogged lightly to the gym as a warm up, her white pony tail reflecting the sun. Keron wore a tight white t-shirt with long sleeves to disguise his valezsan alloy arm and low slung black shorts, while Fale had on a body hugging tank top with leggings cut off at her knee.

The gym door was propped open with a ten-pound hand weight. Fale could tell why, the moment she entered. It was dim and stale. It stank of the human body and the air was humid with the sweat of so many hard-working men and women. The mirrors, put up on brick walls, were covered on the edges with condensation. There was a cool breeze at Fale's feet and fans were on, but the air at her nose was hot. The contradiction was disconcerting.

There was a desk right inside the door where they scanned their fake wristbands, and the rest of the giant room was split into sections by weights and machines. Keron grabbed a white towel from a big tub and handed one to Fale. "To wipe down your seat, before and after you use it," he explained. She nodded. *This is definitely not the TacTrac.* The TacTrac had light and life and incense and air. No mirrors, no machines, and no feeling of being of being stared at. Which Fale was certainly feeling right now. She lowered her head.

Keron showed her where the machines were. She followed him to the free weights. "Do you ever do the machines?" she asked.

"No," he said. "Machines are for girls. Besides, I max them all out."

Fale huffed. "For girls, huh?"

"Um, yeah," he said in a snarky tone. "Free weights are for men."

"Wanna bet?" she asked.

"This again? You ready to lose?"

"This one I'm confident about." She smiled.

“What’s the bet?” he asked.

“I can lift at *least* half of whatever you can do today on free weights.”

“Okay. What’s the wager?”

“Hmm. Loser cooks dinner and does the dishes while the winner takes a nice hot bath,” she said.

“I don’t want a bath, but I’ll take it.” They shook hands.

For everything Keron lifted, pressed or squatted, Fale kept up with at least half or more of his weight all morning. They pulled down, pushed up, rowed back and did flys. Keron tried to tire her out, but she kept up with him to his utter surprise.

Finally, he was done. They got bottles of water and Keron drained his in one gulp. “I’m through,” he said.

“Oh, thank the stars.” Fale let her head roll back on her shoulders.

“What? I thought you could go another mile,” he accused.

“I would have, if you had.” She shook out her arms.

“You are one competitive girl,” Keron said, pulling his left arm across his body to stretch it.

A man walked up to Fale and offered his hand, “You are pretty impressive for such a little girl. I’m Quinn.”

“Hi.” Fale shook his hand. “Thank you.”

“Would you like to go out for a drink sometime?” he asked confidently, flexing some very impressive muscle himself.

“Hey buddy,” Keron interjected. “She’s with someone.”

“I don’t see a ring on her finger, *buddy*,” he retorted, turning toward Fale. Keron steamed.

“Actually, I am with him,” Fale said to Quinn and pointing to Keron behind him.

“If you want a real man, all over, give me a call.” Quinn pressed a piece of paper into her hand.

“Get your hands off my wife,” Keron said.

“Wife?” Quinn asked Fale. “With a fantocci?”

Fale nodded. “I took my ring off to lift weights,” she said. “Sorry, Quinn.”

He walked off mumbling something about how no one in their right mind marries one of *them*. Fale understood, though. Either he hadn’t believed her lie or he was just another fantophobic jerk. She felt guilty, then she saw Keron’s face, and she felt even worse. Like she’d done it on purpose. “I’m sorry, Keron.”

He heard her guilt and defused instantly.

“Sprout, you don’t have to be sorry.” He put his arm around her shoulders. “You didn’t do anything wrong. People want to be with you. Let’s get going, if you’re done?”

“Oh, hell yes,” she said. “My body is going to hurt tomorrow.”

“I have to go by the store.”

“No problem.”

Keron stopped by the drug store and told Fale he would only be a few minutes, so she stayed out front and stretched her limbs. People going in and coming out gave her second looks, but no one seemed to recognize her, even though there were papers everywhere describing her and Keron with their pictures. She took down her ponytail and let her hair hang next to her face like a shield. When no one was looking, she made a small flame in her palm to check out the situation. It was blue, not black and evil, so she wasn’t worried.

“Is there anything else you want to do while we’re in the city?” Keron asked.



“Yes. Since we’re disguised, I want to go into some buildings that Nelson frequented, to see if my flame turns black. I can ask the shopkeepers if they-”

“If they have a machine hidden in their shops?” Keron teased.

“No, but maybe someone has seen it and didn’t know what it was.”

“Asking questions to the wrong person could get Control involved. Please be careful.” He sighed. “And let’s be quick, I’m getting nervous being out in the open like this.”

They walked quickly to the plaza shops, avoiding Control officers, and visited a handful of stores. Her flame made every color except black. Feeling defeated, she gave up and went into a store of undergarments to purchase some real pajamas. She found a pair in lavender cotton with a small daisy print, and a nightgown in a red filmy, soft fabric. *Maybe he’ll see this and realize I’m serious.* She met Keron outside the shop and showed him the lavender set only, keeping the red nightgown as a surprise.

It was nearing late afternoon when they began their trek home. *Home.* Fale thought how funny it was that she was beginning to feel so at home in the little house after so short a time. All their purchases were shoved into Keron’s bulging backpack. They held hands walking back and Fale said, “I wanted to ask you something.” She looked down with a blush.

“Ask away.” He held their hands under her chin and lifted her face up to his. He smiled gently into her eyes.

“Lisle asked if we were together.”

“That’s not a question,” he chuckled. “What did you tell him?”

“I said we hadn’t talked about it.”

“So, is this us talking about it?” he baited her.

Fale was getting flustered. “I guess. I mean, what do you? Oh, shoot. Stop. I lost my boot.”

Keron stopped while Fale fixed her shoe, stuck in the mud, grinning dimples. She was oblivious to his teasing mood. “Keron, I know technically you’re my husband, but what are you to me?” she asked, finally getting it out.

“What do you want me to be?”

“I don’t know? What is there? Are we together? I don’t know what to call you.”

“I kind of like lover extraordinaire, but I guess ‘boyfriend’ to our friends should be fine.”

Fale smiled. “I’ve never had a boyfriend before.”

“Well now you do,” he said. She laughed out of awkwardness. It was everything she’d wanted to hear, but she still felt out of place. She smiled to herself and let the feeling of being part of something bigger than herself take over, and was comforted by it. Her heart was already sewing itself to his, one stitch at a time. She was in over her head and she knew it, but the way he made her heart race when he pulled her close and whispered against her mouth, spoke to her soul. Her spirit flew, like crispy leaves on an autumn wind.

The house was still light when they returned, so Keron showered and changed into his new clothes. He looked masculine, yet comfortable in the kitchen with his bare feet. He began to look for what he would cook for dinner, since he lost the bet, while Fale read from Lisle’s book of mages on the couch. As the sun set, Fale lit the lanterns in the living room and Keron stayed in the kitchen. “You’d better get in the tub, if you wanna soak,” Keron called to her.

Fale put down her book and went into the bathroom to start the water. She found her package from the store and placed it on a chair in the bathroom. Keron came in to hand Fale a small vial. “I bought this for you,” he said. It was rose oil. “Pour it in the bath,” he instructed, and kissed her on his way to the kitchen.

Fale closed the door and soaked in the heady scent of roses. The hot water washed away

the stiffness of her muscles. The oil made her skin feel like silk and steam curled the hairs slipped out of her bun. When Keron called her for dinner thirty minutes later, she let the water out, dried off and put on her new nightgown.

Fale stepped into the kitchen while Keron's back was turned. He was setting a hot pizza on the table. Supreme, Fale's favorite, with salad and a bottle of wine. A lantern sat on the table casting shadows around the kitchen. Keron threw the hot pad on the counter and turned around. He froze and stared at Fale. She wore a red nightgown with spaghetti straps that was sheer enough to see the outline of her waist through the fabric reaching her knees. She could almost see his heartbeat speed.

Keron held out a chair for Fale and she said, "Thank you."

"You're welcome," he choked.

"You like it," she observed happily. "It was a surprise."

"Yeah, we'll see if I can eat now," he said, and Fale laughed.

True to his word, Keron was hardly able to eat his meal. His gaze was on Fale the whole time. Her bare shoulders shone in the dancing light of the lantern, and the warm scent of roses permeated their little space. Keron poured Fale a glass of wine. She looked down at the nightie and reached for her wine, emptying it without stopping.

Keron poured her another, but when she reached for it, he said knowingly, "Slow down on this one."

"Okay," her voice shook.

"Fale?"

"It's nothing." She smiled tentatively.

"You look beautiful," his voice was almost a whisper. Fale relaxed and smiled genuinely at him then. He wore a mask of concern, and he leaned forward in his chair, as close to her as the

table would allow. He held his hands out and laid them on the table. His shirt sleeves were pushed up to his elbows, and she looked down at the corded muscle on his left forearm and his valesan arm on the right. Both of his hands, however, were flesh and she reached out to lay her palms on his. His grip was warm and strong. It made her think about how it would feel to have his hands roam her body, his long fingers spanning her waist, and heat flowed through her veins like tunnels of lava.

“I don’t think I can eat anymore,” she said.

“Me either,” he agreed. “Go read your book and sip your wine while I clean up. I’ll come get you.”

“I can help,” she offered, standing up with her plate and going to the sink.

“No,” he said quickly. “I won’t be able to do anything with you in here. Go sit on the couch.”

She did her best to sashay out of the room and Keron groaned. Fale smiled to herself. *Bonus points for me.* She went to the couch and tried to read, but her mind wandered. She read the same paragraph over and over, thinking about what it would feel like to trust somebody with herself in a whole new way. Would Nelson kill him? If Nelson was a machine, he could most surely rip Keron apart, if he remembered who they were. But if he was a machine, he wouldn’t care about her anymore, so the point was moot. She decided not to worry about it now, it was escalating her anxiety. Would Keron think she was not exciting enough or beautiful enough or lacking somehow? She’d seen the kind of girls Keron attracted. What if she turned into Taran? That would be disastrous. A sparkle flickered in the corner of her eye, the Ondah. She picked it up and smoothed her fingers over its buffed surface. The jewels were polished brilliantly. She wondered what would happen if she tried it out. Lucien had said to have Keron nearby, but what could happen?

Lost in thought, she didn’t notice Keron until he stood in front of her shirtless in his lounge

pants, holding out a hand to her. His every muscle was defined and smooth. Fale stood up in front of him, running her hand along the washboard of his stomach, and handing him the Ondah.

“You want to check this out?” He looked down at the disc.

“I thought we might. If it’s okay?”

“As you desire,” he said in a low timbered voice that made Fale’s stomach warm. He watched her as she reached up and smoothed his hair back behind his ear, pulling him down to kiss her. He was going to let her explore him, but she deepened the kiss and said, “Take me to the bedroom.” He leaned down and scooped her up behind her knees, carrying her to the middle of the bed, placing her on the pillows.

Keron had lit a few candles sending light whirling around the room, chasing shadows everywhere. He knelt on the bed facing Fale and picked up a small box from his bedside table. “Before anything, as my wife,” he looked down at her. “You need a ring. I didn’t like that guy not knowing you were with me.” He opened the box and took out a beautiful silver ring with a sky-blue stone. It had filigree all along the sides, the raised stone was perfectly round and the color of Keron’s eyes. “You said it was your favorite color,” he said.

Fale’s eyes were wet. “It’s the best gift I’ve ever gotten.” She held it up to the light.

“Lemme put it on you,” he said, taking it back and holding it next to her left ring finger.

~\*~

Somewhere along the road, she had turned into what he was looking for. He knew their wrist bands would link them now for the rest of their lives, but for some reason, it didn’t bother him. He couldn’t imagine life without her sassy smile, her hidden tenderness, her discipline, just *her*. He realized he actually wanted to spend the rest of his life discovering Fale. It made his gut clench and his heart ache.

“Will you marry me, wife?” he asked.

“What?”

“We could do it, you know. Have the mages make it official?”

“Are you serious? Wait, does this have to do with um, making love? I don’t need to make it official to be with you,” she said.

“Geez, Fale. I’m trying to give you my heart here.”

“Are you sure?” She pulled her hand away.

“So, you don’t want to marry me?” He looked defeated.

“It’s not that. I don’t think you really want to marry me.”

“I wanna show you everything you’ve missed. I wanna be with you for every new experience. I want to know we are doing this together even though I don’t deserve you. I just want you. Will you take the ring as my girlfriend, at least?”

“Yes,” she said, her eyes shining. She had wanted to belong to someone for the longest time. The day Nelson claimed her would be forever etched into her mind, but he was her mentor, her guardian. She needed to be one half of a whole. She realized she had never stopped loving Keron. His returning her feelings melted her heart. She stuck her hand out again, and he slid the ring on her finger.

“Don’t cry.” He kissed her.

“Can’t help it,” she said between kisses. “You want me.”

“I promise I do.” He leaned his forehead against hers.

Fale was overcome. Keron picked up the Ondah and said, “Let’s attempt to draw out your powers. How does this thing work?” He shook it upside down, making her laugh.

“Give it to me.” She took the Ondah and laid it on the bed between them as they sat cross-

legged.

“What’s next?” Keron watched Fale as she took the glass of water from his bedside table and poured some into the shallow dish. She spoke the only Crion words she knew over the water, and waved her hands theatrically.

“That should do it, don’t you think?” She grinned at him.

“You forgot hocus pocus.”

Fale leaned over the liquid-filled disc and gasped. She sat transfixed, staring at her reflection. She touched her face, her hair, her ears.

“What is it? What do you see?” Keron asked.

“It’s the princess...” she reached her hand toward the water and her hand went right through the reflection; and the dish.

“Fale, wait. Don’t put your hand in there-” He leaned over to push her hand away.

“But I want to touch...” Fale’s arm was sucked into the liquid up to her elbow. She was obviously in a trance-like state, her eyes void of emotion, “...the princess.” Keron was glad only her arm could fit into the disc, when it began to enlarge as her shoulder came near it. He didn’t know what to do.

“Wake up, Fale. C’mon, wake up!” He jumped behind her, grabbed her around the waist and pulled backward. She felt like dead weight. Actually, it felt like she was being pulled forward. Holding her with his valezsán arm, he reached around her for the water glass and splashed her in the face.

“Aaah! Keron, what are you doing?” She was livid. She realized what was happening and it wasn’t Keron holding her arm. She tried to pull back, to no avail. Terror gripped her by the throat like a python tightening around its prey. “My arm is hot, Keron. Pull me out. Please pull me out.”

“I’m trying,” he grunted and pulled Fale like a game of tug o’ war with an unseen player, but she slid in farther and farther. Her neck was touching the liquid surface, now beginning to hover in the air like a mirror on an invisible wall.

“It’s burning, Keron, hurry. I don’t want to get sucked in there.”

“Use your fire. Push it out toward whatever is holding you.” He held on, afraid to lose her.

“It’s not working.” She felt a jerk on her arm, and yelled out in pain.

“Wait. You are supposed to be waking up your powers from this, right? So, let go. Open yourself up like you did with Lucien and see what happens. Stop resisting.”

“Don’t let me go.” Her voice shook.

“Never.”

~\*~

She took a deep breath and centered her mind on her core. On letting go of her resistance to the pull, to the pain, to the unknown, and welcomed it all. It took a few seconds of conscious releasing, but then wave after wave of energy filled her. Cool peace like mint, and calm joy like sunshine. Fale relaxed in Keron’s arms and he sighed with relief. They were both breathing hard when she pulled her arm out of the Ondah. The disc shrank back to its normal size and they set it on the floor.

“Well, that was an adventure,” he said quietly, holding her in his lap.

“I think I understand it now, but I know why I need to have you near me next time,” she laid a hand on his chest, slid it up to his muscled shoulder and down to his bicep.

“Do you think you’ll have to use it again?” He ran a finger lightly under the strap of her nightgown from the shoulder down to her breast. She inhaled a shaky breath.

“I don’t think everything is awake yet.” Her hand traveled back the way it came and



snaked around the thick column of his neck. She loved the feeling of his hair between her fingers, raking her nails across his scalp.

“Mmmm,” he responded, gently turning himself so she was lying on the bed and he was laying over her. She looked at him through hooded lids and he grinned with dimples.

*That is so damn hot.*

Fale held Keron close to her, digging her fingers into his shoulders. He ran his hands down her body, lightly sweeping them up over the contours of her flesh. She needed to be close to him, but she couldn't get close enough. She felt like she wanted to be inside him, to be one person with him. He hugged her back, picking up her head in his hand. Tears of desperation rolled from her welling eyes. She clung to him. “What is it, Sprout?” he asked tenderly.

“I can't hold you tight enough. I need to be closer to you and I can't,” she cried.

He looked at her knowingly, and soon they were kissing with a passion she had never felt before. Only they existed, and as his fingers had skimmed her skin the night before, this time they explored with purpose, every part of her. Fale offered her hesitation to him and when he knew she felt safe, he laid bare all their secrets in the gentlest way. With her skin against his, she finally felt what she'd been missing. Every single glorious thing.

~\*~

The flames flickered in time with their breath as they lay in each other's embrace. “You okay?” Keron looked down at Fale, concern etched on his face.

“Perfect,” Fale said, touching his cheek. “I feel whole for the first time.” She ran her fingers over the cut on his lip and her palm warmed. The cut faded under her hand. Suddenly, she was touching him everywhere she could find a bruise or scar.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“Healing you,” she said.

Keron touched his lip. "Did it happen because of us?"

"It's the Ondah, I guess. It's supposed to bring my latent power into something I can use," she said, touching his brow. "Lucien did say it was part of a ritual, though, didn't he? It's like we make magic together. The Ondah feels like it starts to fill a hole deep inside me, but I didn't hold the power until your touch awakened me completely. I wonder what other gifts we could wake?"

Keron grinned, "Wanna find out?"

Fale laughed at him and ran her hands through his hair. "Kiss me," she said.

"Gladly," he smirked. "Where?"

"I'll show you," Fale said provocatively.

She led the way and they threw the quilts onto the floor...

## CHAPTER 13

The morning sun streamed through the window onto Fale's pillow. The candles had guttered, the wine bottle was empty, and they had used another vial of rose oil and plenty of protection. She wasn't sure if the trip to the gym yesterday was making her body so sore or if she had overdone it last night; if that was even possible. Fale was getting cold without the quilt, but the places where the sunlight touched were deliciously warm. She remembered her palms getting warm last night, healing Keron, and a few strange occurrences she'd have to talk to Lisle about.

"What're you thinking so hard about?" Keron nipped her ear, sending goosebumps down her already cold body. His mouth sent her heartbeat out of control like a runaway kite kicking in the wind.

Fale shivered in his arms. "I was thinking about some things I need to ask Lisle today."

"Tell me?"

"My new gifts."

Keron smiled. "Glad I was there for you. And after..." He grinned wickedly.

"I don't think we should tell Lisle and Izzy about how it happened," she said. "I need to keep the Ondah a secret to be safe. For now."

"I wouldn't anyway," Keron said. "Nobody's business."

She smiled at him. "Just ours."

He looked down at the body in his arms, and held her close to him. "Just ours, my sweet Sprout."

"I don't think I mind the nickname so much anymore," she whispered.

When they finally decided to get up, they showered and ate together. Fale put on her new skinny denims and a deep blue top to go with her ring and set off her white hair. Keron wore

khaki's and his long-sleeved t-shirt. His black hair curling with moisture from the hot shower. Fale looked into his cerulean eyes and wanted to go back to bed desperately. Her stomach turned somersaults. The sight of him reminded her of all the ways he had driven her wild with his touch. *Tonight, Fale*, she told herself. She could see the desire in his eyes as he looked at her clothes in approval, and she knew he was really seeing her as he had this morning.

"Let's leave before we decide not to," Keron said.

"Good idea," Fale agreed, taking her bag and Keron's hand.

As they passed the TacTrac, a woman was walking toward them, using a cane. Her face was as wrinkled as crumpled waxed paper, the waxen lines cut deep into her tanned face, but her eyes were clear. Fale recognized her instantly and lowered her head, but not soon enough. She pulled Keron's elbow and turned her toes to step left, but the woman thrust her cane out. It hit Fale and Keron in the stomach, effectively stopping them mid-stride. Fale jerked her head to gaze at the woman, her white hair swinging behind her and her mouth open in shock.

"Fale." The woman's eyes narrowed.

"Sensei Edan," Fale stuttered, "H-How are you?"

"What have you done, girl?" She dropped the cane but held them captive with her stare.

"I don't know what you mean-" Fale began, but the older woman let out a cackle of laughter.

"Don't think me senile, young one. I've seen the posters and I've known Sensei Wickarsham for longer than your lifetime. He wouldn't leave you, so where is he?"

Fale looked around nervously and lowered her voice, "I don't know."

"We need him here, and you are out cavorting with fantocci. What have you done with him?"

“I really don’t know where he is.” Fale held her hands open as if to show she wasn’t holding him in her grip. Keron’s elbow lightly nudged her arm and he nodded to the street where two Control Officers were walking with scanners, talking between themselves.

Sensei Edan didn’t miss the exchange and looked over her shoulder to see the officers. She turned back to Fale and Keron with a glint in her eye.

Fale held her breath. She poured every bit of pleading into her face and voice. “Please, I am going to find him. I am working on a plan. You’re right, he’s alive. He has to be, but I didn’t do anything to him. You have to believe me.”

The woman shrugged. “That’s the problem. I don’t.”

Fale backed up a step. “You don’t what?”

“I don’t believe you.” She said it in a whisper like she was telling Fale a secret. Then, without warning, she yelled, “CONTROL! CONTROL!” She looked at the officers as she pointed toward the young couple.

Fale felt Keron take her hand and pull her backward. Then they were running. She doubted the officers knew why they were chasing them, they probably assumed she and Keron had tried to mug the Sensei or rob her. Keron led the way around buildings, through the parking lot, and headed toward his old apartment building. Her hair whipped around her head and stuck to her dewy face. She could barely hear their feet beating the sidewalk over the thumping of her heart.

The officers chased them doggedly, blowing whistles. They were gaining too much attention. “We’re gonna get stuck.” Fale panted.

“No, we’re not.” The look of concentration on Keron’s face did a lot to put her mind at ease. He would know what to do. They had a good lead on the Control officers. Keron made a sharp right, crossed the main street of the city, and pulled Fale behind the grocery. She stumbled when her foot snagged on plastic netting, but he caught her before she could spill onto the

concrete.

“Come on,” he encouraged, “we’ll lose them.”

As soon as the officers came around the grocery corner, Keron was pulling Fale into another apartment complex. He took them to the roof, and barred the door, with his valezsan arm. When the men reached the metal door they couldn’t open it. They looked out the tall window, but didn’t see Fale and Keron crouched down below it.

“It’s locked,” one man said.

“They must have gone another way,” said the other officer.

Fale opened her mouth, but Keron held a finger to her lips. He held the door for several more minutes, until they heard Control outside the building, walking away.

When they felt it was safe, they headed to Izzy’s as fast as they could. Izzy answered her door quickly, looking around outside.

“Where have you guys been?” she asked. “It’s after noon already.”

“Sorry, we were tied up. Where’s Lisle?” Fale asked.

“He got tired of waiting for you love birds and went out for lunch. He’s bringing me back a sandwich and fries.” Izzy explained. “Did you eat?”

“Yep,” Fale said, squeezing Keron’s hand.

“Yeah,” he said.

She looked them up and down. “You two actually look good. I didn’t think you had any clothes. Have you been shopping?”

“We did, actually,” Fale said.

“Without me?” Izzy protested.

“Seriously? We’re on the run, Izzy,” Keron said.

The door slammed open, right into Keron’s shoulder. “Oh, sorry man, didn’t see you there,” Lisle said, carrying two boxes.

Izzy shooed everyone away from the door to her couch and pulled up two chairs. “Here Lisle,” she offered him one. He put the boxes on the coffee table. “Which one’s mine?” Izzy asked.

“That one.” Lisle pointed, taking a seat. “The other one is potato skins for Fale. Loaded.”

“My favorite,” Fale said.

“I know,” Lisle sat back smugly.

“I just ate, but I’ll take them for dinner, Lisle. Thank you,” Fale said. Lisle nodded and clasped his hands over his chest. Keron grabbed Fale’s hand.

Izzy rolled her eyes, and ate her lunch. “Tell us what you found, Lisle,” she said.

“All I found out from my mentor is the wizards are looking for you, Fale. Have you had any visions?” Lisle asked.

“Not since I got my power,” she said.

“Do you know why you’re not getting them?”

“No, but I have some new gifts to ask you about.”

“I’ll get to it. It appears no one can find you, but I said I’d heard from you. Control was looking north and I think they were close, so I told the wizards about the guest house you stayed in. Not your new names, of course, but you staying on trade; then told them you were moving south, since the coterie house is North and East.”

“Thanks Lisle,” Fale said.

“Yeah, thanks, man,” Keron said.

“Now what gifts did you get?” Lisle asked.

“I know one.” Izzy shouted. “Look at Keron’s face.” Lisle looked confused. Izzy sighed. “You boys are so unobservant. She healed his face. It was all cut up two days ago.”

“I’m not a boy,” Keron said. “I’m twenty-four.”

“Whatever. Lisle’s only eighteen,” Izzy rolled her eyes.

“Wow,” Lisle sounded odd, “Amazing.”

“What’s the matter, Lisle?” Fale asked.

“I’ve never seen real healing before.”

“I’ll show you.” Fale got up and pulled Lisle with her.

“What’re you gonna do?” Keron asked. He knew to heal, there must be an injury.

“It’s okay,” she dragged Lisle to Izzy’s kitchenette. “Stand near the sink.”

“I’m coming, too,” said Izzy, hurrying over.

Fale took a steak knife and Lisle’s hand. “Do you trust me?”

“Totally,” Lisle nodded.

“I can’t seem to heal myself, only other people,” she hesitated, then slit his forearm over the sink, so it wouldn’t bleed on the carpet.

“Ick,” Izzy paled.

Keron sat on the couch. “I hate it when you do that.”

“Watch,” Fale said. She held her hand over the wound, concentrating on her magic. When she knew it was done, she wiped the blood from his arm. There was no mark, no redness, just white flawless skin.

“Whoa,” Lisle was speechless.



“But how do you know you can’t heal yourself?” Izzy grabbed Fale’s arm and turned it over to see it riddled with cuts. She inhaled sharply. “Keron, did you know about this?”

“Turns out no one can stop her when she has a stupid idea.” He shrugged. “What was I supposed to do?”

“Well, that’s true. You’ve got a point.” Izzy looked sternly at Fale.

“It’s not all,” Fale tried to call their attention back to her powers and not her character flaws. “Izzy, do you have a dull knife you don’t want anymore?”

“Are you sure? I have a rusty one, but...” Izzy grimaced and cocked her head.

“What are you gonna do with that one?” Keron asked. Concerned, he got up and came over.

Izzy laid an old steak knife on the counter and backed away.

“You’ll see.” Fale thought about what she wanted to do to the knife and let the heat travel her arm. She touched the knife. It turned to ashes.

“Holy stars,” Izzy expelled a breath.

“Disintegration,” Lisle said in awe.

“What did you destroy at the house?” Keron asked.

“My toothbrush,” Fale said. “This morning.”

“Can you do any more?” Lisle asked.

“Only one,” Fale said sheepishly.

“Well,” Izzy said impatiently, “show us.”

“Hold your ears,” Fale warned. She waited until all three of the others had covered their ears and began to cry out in a low voice, getting louder and higher pitched as her vocal chords got warm. She very soon reached a staggering volume and pitch so high Izzy’s water glass

shattered. Fale stopped and a neighbor pounded on the wall. "Sorry," yelled Fale. Izzy and Lisle's eyes were huge, but Keron wore the biggest smile.

"You've been busy the last two days," Lisle said. "Any idea what brought these on?"

"Not really. Maybe it's time, like with my visions." Fale hated lying.

"What were you doing when you found out you could make a sonic scream?" Lisle asked.

Fale blushed furiously. "Is that what it's called?"

"We were working out," Keron offered for her.

"And you needed to scream?" Lisle asked, trying to make sense of the situation.

"I hurt myself," Fale said. Keron coughed back a laugh and, she kicked him in the shin. "Like that."

"Ouch," he said.

"Speaking of working out, they are talking about closing the TacTrac," Izzy said.

"No," Fale despaired. "It's a terrible idea."

"What choice do they have? Nelson owned it and left everything to you. As far as anyone knows, he's been murdered and now you're gone, too. There's no one left to run it, so Control is taking over."

"None of the teachers are willing to volunteer?" Fale asked, her heart aching.

"They have been, Fale, but people aren't all as good as you want them to be. They're just people," Izzy said. She took Fale's hands in hers. "I'm sorry, honey."

"I know you love the TacTrac, too, Iz." Fale sighed. Every minute of the past few days had changed her. "The training center is the last straw. I really can't decide if I'm missing my home, school, Nelson, or my past. Whatever it is, it's gone. That part of me is empty."

"What do you mean?" Lisle asked.

“My identity as Fale is fading. I feel like I’m becoming someone else,” she said. “I’m scared, you guys. I’m afraid if I let go, I’ll turn into someone I don’t know.”

Keron wrapped his arms around her, “Don’t let go. You’re still everything that makes ‘Fale’ the right one for this fight.”

“I see what you mean,” Izzy whispered to Fale and winked. She reached out and took Fale’s hand. “What’s this ring?”

“Oh this,” Fale took her hand back.

“My wife needed a ring for the public,” Keron explained.

Fale smiled and nodded, “No big deal.” A hurt look flashed across Keron’s face.

*Great Fale. That was smooth.*

“Let me see it,” Izzy said, pulling at Fale’s hand. “It’s pretty.”

“Yes, it is,” Fale agreed.

“It looks like blue hemimorphite,” Lisle said.

“Could be,” Keron said. “Whatever that is.”

“It’s a minor ore of a zinc mineral,” Lisle explained.

“Thank you, Encyclopedia Lisle.” Izzy said sarcastically.

“Just commenting,” he mumbled.

“When’s the next council meeting?” Fale asked Lisle, effectively changing the subject.

“Not for another few days,” he informed them.

“We need to contact Taran.” Fale was being pulled to release the slaves in Garrith along with Nelson, and she wanted as much information as possible, so she could plan a liberation. There was still so much she didn’t know. Hopefully Taran was taught about his past and together

they could join the puzzle pieces.

“Do you want to meet tomorrow at my place?” Lisle offered.

“We are really pushing things by being in the city so much. But we need to do this,” she agreed.

“Excuse me,” Izzy said. “What about us?”

“We can come back here when we’re done and tell you everything,” Lisle said.

Keron loosened his grip on Fale, she knew he felt like a half man next to an educated wizard, because he couldn’t compete with their shared background in magic.

“I guess we can wait for you, right, Keron?” Izzy said.

“Whatever.” He dropped his arms from Fale and crossed them over his chest.

Fale noticed the change immediately, but she didn’t know what had caused it. “Keron are you ready to go back to the house?” she asked tentatively.

“Yep.”

*Oh good, one word answers.*

“Izzy. Lisle. I think we’re going to leave. We’ll be back tomorrow at lunch time, so there’s no confusion.”

“See ya, Fale,” Izzy said.

“Are you okay?” Lisle asked Fale and narrowed his eyes at Keron, who glared back at him.

“I’m fine,” Fale assured. “He just needs a nap,” she said sharply as if Keron were a child.

*He’s acting like one.*

“Come on, Keron.” Fale took his hand and said, “Bye, guys.”

They were in the marsh when Fale said, “Okay, you stubborn man, talk.”

“‘Bout what?”

“Are you serious?” she exclaimed. “Please don’t insult me. Give me credit for noticing that you have totally shifted gears.”

“Fine,” he said.

“That’s it?” she yelled at him. “You’re going to give one word answers to *me*?”

“Yep.”

“Grrr.” Fale dropped his hand and stomped back the way they had come.

“Where are you going?” he yelled at her.

“I’m going to find the machine, because you are insufferable.”

“The shops are all closing.”

“I’m not going to the shops. I’m going to the plant.” She tossed her words over her shoulder.

“The plant? No. It’s too dangerous,” he said. “Fale? Do you hear me? Come back here.”

Fale continued walking. She had not started this fight, but she wouldn’t back down now for anything.

“Great,” he ground out. “Hold up, I’m coming with you.”

“Suit yourself.” She walked faster. Keron jogged to catch up with her.

Though the area outside the plant was dark, the fire-filled urns were always burning in the entryway. Fale crept from the shadows, up the walled ramps, and lingered at the doorway in an alcove. The sky was turning a deep violet, shrouding the Industrial Plant in lucky shadows for

Fale. She didn't check behind her, she knew Keron would be there and she knew she was safe from that direction, so she progressed. At night, the plant workers would be changing shifts. Fale didn't have to wait long. When she saw the first of the late-shifters approaching the forever open doors of the plant, she played her cards and walked in behind them. It felt like the plant was swallowing her up in its gaping mouth. The entrance was cave-like, it had not been made modern, and for effect fires played in urns on either side of her. When the workers split to go to their different departments, Fale doubled back to find the administrative offices. The modern hallways were dark. A few of the offices on either side of her had lights behind the frosted glass, and some held moving shadows. Fale went to the president's office. She jiggled the bar, but the door wouldn't open.

Keron pushed her out of the way.

"It's locked." she whispered furiously at him.

"I know, but I fix locks all the time. I'll have this one open in no time." He lifted the leg of his pants and pulled two slim tools from his calf, then looked at her with his eyebrow raised.

"Just open the door," she said.

He quickly disabled the lock and she pushed him aside to slide the door open. Fale was about to walk into the office when someone grabbed her wrist and pulled her back. Her heart jumped to her throat. When she collided with Keron's chest, she was livid. "What are you doing? You scared me to death." she whispered passionately.

"Look." He pointed down to a tiny red line crossing the doorway. "The light came on when you opened the door."

"An alarm," Fale took a great breath in. "You saved us."

"Yep."

"Oh stars, if you're going to be like that-" She didn't finish and stepped over the beam of

light into the dark office. There was hardly enough light to see the objects in the room. She frantically searched everywhere, while he stood static with his arms crossed. Nothing that could be her machine was there. There were prototypes and metal gadgets galore, but none fitted her key. She realized she was sweating and panting. The room was hot, and it seemed to be getting smaller. Or was it her?

“Are you done?” Keron asked calmly.

“Are you seriously not helping me here?”

“Helped you get in, didn’t I?” He smiled in the darkness.

“I’m going back.” He was frustrating her to the point of distraction. She would find the tech designers office next.

She stomped past him and out the door, tripping the alarm. Her eyes were wide as she looked at Keron in terror. He let his head drop backwards and shook it, then stalked toward her, grabbed her by the arm and said, “Let’s get outta here.”

They ran for the entrance as fast as they could. Office doors opened as they darted past, down the halls, turning left, then right, then left again. Fale felt like they were mice in a maze. She saw the doors and thought they would make it. She was so glad the cave-like entrance was always open. As they pushed through the set of glass doors, a cage began descending at the mouth of the cave. Keron cursed and Fale screamed in frustration. She pumped her arms as she pushed her muscles harder. The gate was lowering too fast. She dove across the slick, polished concrete floor. The gate was two feet from the ground. Fale felt a hand on her back. She was caught! They had her. Then she felt a violent push and she slid through the gate just as it was closing. She pulled her feet up and lay there in fetal position.

*Keron!*

Desperately she looked back to see his valezsan foot caught sideways in the gate. There

was a grinding noise as the bars tightened on his foot and tried to close. Security people showed up on the other side shouting and waving metal rods. They stuck a rod through the gate and poked Keron with it. He automatically stiffened and quaked as electrical current ran the length of his body.

“I’m coming!” Fale yelled to him.

“Nnnoo,” he called. “S-stay aw-way.”

“I can’t,” she cried, running up to him.

He pulled his foot with all his strength and it moved a few inches. The machine continued to whirl and click as the wheels turned uselessly. Fale grabbed his ankle and pulled. A security watchman pushed his stick through the bars and hit her in the shoulder. She froze and gritted her teeth through the pain of a thousand wasps buzzing in her ears. Her fingers felt like they could release bolts of lightning. *That’s it.* When she could move again, she turned toward the guards with her palms outstretched and unleashed a stream of fire. Stunned, they backed up, but she could already hear the clomping of boots and yelling from down the street. Control was on its way. They pulled together and Keron’s foot looked like it was bending under the weight of the machination. The yelling was getting closer and the people inside plant could hear them, too. They began calling for Control.

“Come on, Keron. One more good pull and we’ve got it.” She encouraged him, trying to calm her own anxiety.

They both pulled, and Keron pushed against the gate with his other foot. The people inside cautiously crept back toward them. Suddenly, his foot was expelled from the pressure and the gate slammed into the concrete. He scrambled to his feet and grabbed Fale’s hand. They took off like racers at the track, and ran to the left.

“Why are we going this way?” Fale asked.



“Because those people are going to tell the Control agents we went this way, but as soon as we’re out of sight, we are heading North.”

Fale appreciated his ability to maintain logic during a crisis. A trait they did not share. True to his word, as they rounded the closest building, they swung right. Peeking around a business office, they could see the agents reach the gate and several people pointed in the direction they had gone. As soon as the agents began running, so did they.

Finally hidden by the marsh, Fale stopped and bent over with her hands on her knees. “I need to catch my breath.” She laughed lightly. “That was an adventure, huh?”

“Sure.”

“Are we back to this?” She stood up to look at him.

“What do you want me to say? Thanks for getting pissed at me and tripping the alarm that almost got us both caught tonight?”

She growled at him. “You are impossible today, you know that? I don’t know what your problem is, but get over it. There are bigger things than us going on.”

“Glad you realize that,” he said.

She turned and walked back to the house by herself, before she could start crying out of frustration.

They ate leftovers from their mini fridge for dinner in silence. Fale’s anger began turning into confusion and loneliness the more Keron pulled away from her. She filled the tub to bathe and remembered how different last night had been. Why had he shut her out? Without Keron, she was missing part of herself.

Fale wanted to use her powers, but she didn’t have anything to heal or destroy. She wanted to scream badly, but thought against it. She settled for making flames in her palm as she sat in

the tub. It was boring, but effective. She felt a release of some of her anxiety.

After drying off, Fale put on her new lavender cotton pajamas. She had hoped to be in a very different place with Keron tonight and wearing her red nightgown, but he was acting like they weren't even friends. She opened the bathroom door and the house was plunged into darkness. Keron had turned out all the lanterns and gone to bed. She felt desperately alone. Unable to deal with his rejection one more time, Fale went to the couch in the darkness.

Keron lay in bed listening to Fale in the living room. She was being as quiet as she could, but he could tell from the way she was breathing and her occasional snuffle that she was crying. He knew it was his fault and he told himself it was better for her to get over him now rather than later. He told himself it was for her own good, but hadn't he done this to her before? Didn't she deserve better than him? Lisle liked her, he would be a good match for her. A better match than him. He had been settled in his decision when he heard her whisper, "You promised you wanted me." Then she began to sob.

Keron's resolve melted. He *had* promised her he wanted her and she thought he didn't. How could she think it? He couldn't hear her heart breaking for another minute. Throwing off the covers, he strode to the couch and said, "I'm sorry, Sprout." He picked her up, cradled her in his arms and took her back to bed. Fale lay her head on his shoulder and cried.

"Stop, honey. I'm here." Keron smoothed a hand down her back.

"I can't," she hiccupped. "Why?"

He knew what she was asking; why did you abandon me? "Because I realized I was masquerading as a free man, with a fake band. I had forgotten for a moment I was a fantocci, an orphaned bondsman, a half man created by the plant and owned by the Agency. Good only for fixing or fighting. And you deserve better," he said.

"I chose you. Tell me how to make you believe it. You belong with me."

“The more I’m with you, the more I believe it. I doubt myself so much,” he said. “You have this bond with Lisle...” Keron was a confident man, but Fale’s friendship with Lisle threatened him for some reason.

“Lisle? He’s my friend. I guess he’s cute, but-“

“You’re not helping.”

Fale laughed. “I’m not sleeping next to Lisle.”

“You’re not actually sleeping next to me, either,” he teased.

“Unless you have something better to do, I’m going to be asleep in minutes.”

“Go to sleep, I’ll be here.” Keron gathered Fale into his arms like she was going to escape and nodded off.

Fale woke not knowing where she was. It was a disconcerting feeling, but she felt anchored by the weight of Keron’s arms; he still held her in his sleep. Her white hair fanned out around them on the pillows and the contrast with his black hair was striking. She gazed at the angles of his face and the strength of his jaw. Fale would have kissed him, but she wanted to look her fill while he was asleep. She loved the way his shoulder and bicep muscles separated, the shape of his chest and the earthy smell that was Keron. She breathed it in by his neck before she kissed the soft flesh there.

“You know that’s creepy, right?” he yawned.

“You didn’t even know what I was doing,” Fale complained.

“Lucky guess. You were up first,” he said.

Fale chuckled. “True.”

Keron slid his arms from her shoulders to her waist, then ran one down her hip. “What

would you like to do this morning before Izzy's?" he asked suggestively. "I was thinking we could go to the gym?"

She lightly slapped his arm in embarrassment. "Didn't you tell Lisle we were working out when we discovered my scream?"

They laughed together. "Is that what you had in mind?" he asked.

She blushed hotly. "Surely there's something new we can do for a few hours. Maybe we can practice my magic."

"As you desire." He grinned. "I'll get the Ondah."

"Check this out," Fale said as they walked in the marsh. Her hand reached out and disappeared from the end of her arm.

"You're freaking me out now," Keron said. "It was only cool the first twenty times."

"If Effailya, me, whatever, had the Ondah, I can see why she had so many powers. I mean, if she got hers the way I get mine," she laughed.

"She had her own, and there has to be a limit. You're awakening what's already there, right? Surely they'll stop coming?" he asked.

"Do you want them to?" she stopped walking.

"It's not... I just think there has to be an end to the power." He turned around.

"I don't know."

"Her power came from inside her, but maybe you have your own power to add to it."

"It's so confusing. And it's all so new to me," she said.

"I know, Sprout. We'll conquer it together," he said. "Now make your hand reappear so I can hold it."

A sudden vision crept up on Fale's sight. *She was walking to the city with Keron and was captured by the Control officers who recognized them from yesterday. Then the pictures were overtaken by gruesome scenes of Keron in the industrial plant being skinned alive, as she waited her turn. He was wailing and there was blood everywhere. Fale screamed. The sound of Keron's pain nearly choked her, but she couldn't stop screaming.*

"Fale." Keron gripped her shoulders tightly. Her eyes were open, but she didn't see him. She was gasping for air and sobbing. He shook her and called her name, but the more he called out to her, the more desperate her crying became. "I'm sorry Sprout," he murmured as he slapped her face.

Finally, her vision cleared and she saw him standing before her, whole and uninjured. "Keron, oh my stars! I thought you were- I thought-" She dissolved into tears again.

"You thought what?"

"I thought they were turning us into machines. I saw you. I saw what they did to you." She hiccupped.

"It didn't happen," he said, smoothing her hair away from her face. "And it won't happen. Whatever you were doing in the vision, we'll do the opposite."

"We were going to the city the way we always do."

"Then we'll go another way. We will just be very careful today, okay?"

She laid her hands on him, loving the feel of his defined chest. "I'm scared."

"I've got you. And no one is going to hurt you as long as I'm alive." He peered into her eyes. "It was only a vision, Fale. We know how to stop them, right? It doesn't mean anything. Hey, you're shaking. Come here."

She stepped into his embrace and tried to breathe normally. She could feel his heartbeat under her ear, and she knew he was worried, too.

*Be brave Fale*, she told herself.

“You ready to go?” he asked and she nodded.

They dashed through the city’s edge, as quickly as they could. No longer afraid of death, but the threat of living an inhuman mechanical existence in a dimension not their own. They knew in the open they were targets. The only thing that drove them to make these risks was the hope that Lisle had the information they needed to win... and to survive.

## CHAPTER 14

When they got to Izzy's, Fale left Keron at the door with a kiss. "I'll be back soon with Lisle," she promised.

"Be careful," he said.

"I will. Tell Izzy I said hi."

He kissed her again and watched her walk away. Lisle's building was only three blocks over and one block down, so she wouldn't have far to go, but he watched her until she was out of sight.

Lisle was in a great mood when Fale arrived at his apartment. "Come in," he welcomed her. "Can I get you some tea? I have jasmine."

"Oooh, I love jasmine."

"I know," he smiled.

"Thanks, Lisle." Fale entered, walked past Lisle's desk and bookcases to his living area with the little couch, chair and coffee table.

Lisle looked comfortable in a soft cream jersey and plaid flannel lounge pants. His glasses were off and his eyelashes were long, brown and curled around his deep brown eyes. His hair was swept to the right and tousled, sticking out here and there. Fale thought about how Lisle had managed to become cute without her realizing it, and wondered if Izzy had noticed.

He poured tea from a pot on the coffee table into demitasse cups with saucers. They both sat down, Lisle in his chair and Fale on the couch. She felt like she was on a normal social call. It was something she had taken for granted before she went into hiding. "Thank you for making this so comfortable, Lisle. I miss just visiting. I feel like everything lately should be a fact-finding mission or a fight. It's nice to be a regular friend."

“I thought you might enjoy a change of pace,” he said.

“I really do. You have no idea. Lisle, you know, you are the only person in my life who’s truly honest with me. I need you around sometimes to remind me that I’m not crazy.”

“What do you mean?”

“Nelson tries to shelter me from the world, which has always been his job, and Keron treats me like I’m breakable. They both keep things from me ‘for my own good’ at times, but not you. You’re always honest and you want me to be who I am, magic and danger and whatever may come.” She smiled warmly at him.

“What about Iz? She’s your friend.” Lisle gave her time to think.

She cocked her head to the side. “I owe Izzy. Since I’ve met her, she has kept me going when I feel desolate, when being an orphan made me feel like an outsider. She never let me sulk. She never let me pull away, and she made sure none of our friends ever made me feel different. But we are different. She wants something else from life, something she can’t get here, with me. I can feel a chasm open between us sometimes, but I’m not willing to lose her. She’s never given up on me, and I won’t give up on her. She’s the only woman in my life and I need her. I know I tried to protect her from all of this, but it wouldn’t feel right going on without her.”

“But why don’t you think she’s honest with you?” he asked.

“I can see it in her eyes. She’s on another level than I am. She won’t say so, but I don’t fit with her plans for herself. She tells everyone she’s happy, and I can see how hard she tries, but she’s miserable. It started when I advanced into Takanori training and she didn’t. Her parents made her go to the TacTrac to be cultured and to work out her high-strung emotions. She hated being stuck in that class and watching me receive my swords.”

“How do you know?”

“Because she told me. She didn’t mean to hurt me, but Izzy has no filter. After that, I made



time to work out with her every evening. Nelson thought we just didn't want to be separated, so he allowed it, but sometimes I wonder if we would still be friends if I hadn't," Fale said, considering her tea cup.

"I don't think that would have torn you two apart." Lisle reached out to pat her hand.

"She doesn't tell me things, Lisle. She thought my crush on Keron was stupid and dangerous, but now she acts like it's so romantic. She's changed."

Lisle nodded. "I think she's a good person, even though she believes in Control, and I think if she comes with us, we can show her. Convince her Control is one of the bad guys."

"I don't want to lose her. I want her to take this journey with me because I need to fix... us. I need her to know I want her with me to the end, and I need to know if she's still my little mother. I don't want to lose another one."

The pregnant silence hung between them as quiet as a thunderstorm.

Lisle gazed at her with sadness. "Would you like to skip contacting Taran today? We can talk, if you want."

"No," she said. "We need to check Garrith for Nelson. Besides, Izzy and Keron will be expecting us to tell them about it."

"True, but I already have things to go over with them."

"Really? What do you have? Did you find something new?" she questioned.

"I have access to some archives I didn't before, and I found a lot of information. The help I'm giving to the wizards has gained me more trust, and passing my last class bumped me up a level from apprentice to wizard-in-training. I haven't been through it all yet, but there are tons of spells, drawings, recipes, and classified history on famous wizards. One of whom is Gryndoll. None of his writings can be found, but there is historical information." Lisle drank his tea.

“When I looked him up, I found the information you wanted on Princess Effailya.”

“Great news.” Fale said enthusiastically, her eyebrows high and her smile warm.

“I figured we could go over it when all four of us are together, unless you want to see it first?” Lisle offered.

“No, I’ll wait,” she said. “Have you had any luck finding the machine?”

“Not yet,” Lisle said regretfully.

“It’s okay. You’re helping already. I really appreciate it.”

“They led a party to the south today, looking for you.”

“That’s good- it means they don’t suspect you, Lisle.” Fale said. “It feels relaxing to be quasi- safe, not having to fight to live anyway.”

“Speaking of fighting, where’s your dagger?”

“Bryla wouldn’t be carrying one, and a dagger wouldn’t fit under her skinny denims,” Fale laughed nervously. “Plus, Keron said he could help protect me if we get into trouble.” Fale felt like she was justifying herself to Lisle, which was silly. *Why would he care if I am protected by Keron? I don’t really need a weapon to take care of myself anyway.* It was obvious he did care. He had a sad look on his face again. The look he often got when they talked alone. The same one he had when he gave her the dagger. “Lisle, why do look at me like that? Why did you get so sad when you gave me the dagger? Did you not really want me to have it? Did it belong to someone special?”

“No,” Lisle said. “I get sad because princesses always look for a warted frog to kiss and find love, but overlook the wizard saving her life, because *he* loves her.”

“What?” Fale asked.

“Nothing,” Lisle said. “Never mind.”

Fale thought he was speaking a riddle, but when she took it literally, she understood. “Oh Lisle.”

“Please, let it go. It doesn’t change anything.”

“How can it not?” Fale reached out to touch his hand.

Lisle inhaled deeply. “Either you love me or you don’t. I don’t think I can hear the answer right now.”

“But Lisle, it’s not that simple.” She wanted to tell him she did love him as a best friend, a beloved brother, one of her favorite fellow humans. In so many ways. Just not the way he needed from her, but she remembered how she felt last night when she had been rejected by Keron and she couldn’t do it. She’d never thought of Lisle in a romantic way, but she couldn’t hand his heart back to him. So, she took it, and tucked it into a safe place; where she could cherish it as the gift it was. “I am honored you told me, Lisle. I won’t forget.” She told him with all the sincerity she had.

“Thanks, Fale.” Lisle looked away from her. “Shall we call Taran?”

Fale didn’t think things were settled between them, but she wanted to spare him pain. “Yes,” she smiled. “Tell me what to do.”

“Close your eyes like last time,” Lisle said. “This should get easier each time until you can control it. It’s a gift, like all the rest.”

Fale wondered why this gift had awakened on its own, without the Ondah’s help, but with Lisle’s. The Ondah was meant to “wake up” powers inside Fale that were already there, but dormant. Maybe Lisle woke up this power from inside her? What did that mean for her and Lisle?

She didn’t have any answers, so she closed her eyes and listened as Lisle spoke in the Crion language. Waiting for a lengthy journey through space and time, Fale was shocked to be

relatively quickly thrust into Taran's body.

She sat around one of several fires, a wooden bowl of vegetable stew in her left hand and a spoon in the other. Her mouth was full of the tasteless, overcooked mess and she had trouble finishing it. It was like swallowing glue. Fale looked blankly around the fire at the other haggard faces of her people, assumedly eating the same stew from the large pot sitting over the crackling flame. Hushed conversation took place all around. "Did ya hear me, Taran?"

"Oh sorry," Fale said, turning to the boy on her right. "I must not have."

"I said, is this the night?"

Fale didn't know what he was talking about. All she could think to say was, "I need more time."

"We gotta do it soon. We'll be losing our chance," the boy said.

"We will," she promised, hoping she wasn't spoiling any of Taran's plans. "Hey," she asked. "Have you noticed any new, ah, slaves lately?"

The boy looked at her strangely. "Why you askin'?"

"I was looking for someone."

"Who?"

"A man," she said. "He's tall and broad, with dark hair."

"I ain't seen a new man, you want I should look around for ya?"

"No. But if you see one, tell me, okay?"

"Okay." The boy ate his stew.

Fale tried to eat another bite, knowing Taran needed the nourishment, but the stuff was awful. She picked at it. "Have you seen my sister?" she asked the boy.

"Sure," he said, pointing with his spoon. "She's over with the girls. You feelin' all right?"

“Yeah,” Fale said, trying to act casual. “I just need to ask her something.”

“I thought she wasn’t speakin’ to ya on account of us sneakin’ into the castle?” Fale tried not to look surprised. Taran had guts, he deserved credit for that. She had to know what they found in there. She knew nothing about the castle. “O’ course you could wait ‘til after supper. She shares a hut with ya,” he said around a mouthful of food, laughing. “Can’t get away from ya then, can she?”

Fale would have waited, but she didn’t know how long she would be there and she didn’t know which hut was hers. “Think I’m gonna get her now.” Fale tried to talk like the other boy.

“Sure, sure.” He dismissed her. “You jus’ tell us when the plan is on.”

“I will,” Fale said, moving to stand. Her back still hurt terribly, it was stiff and painful from her shoulders to her hips and she winced as she felt the scabs stick to the rough wool of her tunic. She took her bowl with her, not knowing what else to do with it.

Fale walked rigidly over to Minova. “Can I talk to ya?” she asked.

Minova acted like she didn’t hear her.

“Minova, I really need ta ask ya somethin’,” Fale tried to talk the way she thought Taran would speak after listening to the other boys. The girls laughed, as Minova took a bite of her stew and chewed. Fale walked over to her and painfully bent to Minova’s ear. “Minova, it’s Fale.”

Minova’s eyes grew round and she swung her head around to look Taran in the face. Fale nodded grimly.

“If you must, Taran,” she said loudly. The girls laughed again. Minova grabbed Taran’s sleeve and pulled Fale out of the circle of the cooking fires. She whispered, “Taran said you have the key to free us. Have you come to free us?”

“It’s more complicated than that, Minova.” She watched the thirteen-year old’s face fall.

Fale tried to explain, "The key goes to a machine and I haven't found it yet."

Minova asked, "Is it here?"

"I don't know where it is," Fale said. "Right now, I'm looking for someone. Have you noticed any new slaves?"

"There are so many of us," she said sadly. "Surely someone would notice, though."

"I need you to look for a man. His name is Nelson. He is big, tall, he has dark hair with gray at the temples, and dark blue eyes."

"Maybe he isn't here?" Minova asked.

"He's here somewhere," Fale said. "And I have to find him."

"Who is he?"

"He's my, my...he raised me."

"Did the wizard take him?" Minova asked.

"Yes," Fale thought about Nelson and her heart beat furiously in her chest. She missed him so much. She was so afraid she wouldn't find him. He had to be with the slaves, he had to be.

Minova's eyes were wide. "What if he's-

*A machine?* It was Fale's greatest fear.

"I don't know, Minova," Fale said. "Is everyone in the castle a machine?"

"We don't know," Minova said. "There are those who tell of the horrors in the dungeon. Slaves go down beneath and become... experiments. Most never return and, if they do, they're never the same... The grave diggers won't even speak about what they've seen."

"That's horrifying."

"My brother and his stupid friends want to sneak in and find out," she said.

“The boy said you weren’t speaking to Taran, because they snuck in,” Fale said.

“They planned to. Tonight,” Minova said. “But if you’re here, then they won’t be able to catch the guard shift.” She smiled. “He’s going to be so mad at you.”

“But you’re happy.” Fale noticed.

“I’d rather keep my brother alive.”

“Then I’m not sorry.”

Minova nodded and said, “I like you.”

“I can’t keep him from going on another night, though. If he has to go, maybe he can look for the machine while he’s there, and my friend,” Fale said.

“I’ll tell him,” Minova promised.

“Thank you.”

People began to pass them and Minova said, “Supper is almost over. You should eat that.”

“I can’t,” Fale said.

Minova took it and shoveled Taran’s helping into her mouth, like she hadn’t eaten in a month. She made little “mmm” sounds as she scooped and chewed. *They’re starving.* Fale’s heart clenched tightly.

“Just stay long enough for the guard to change and I’ll send you back. They should be switching any time now,” Minova waved her spoon around.

“Okay,” Fale smiled conspiratorially at her. They’d keep Taran alive another day.

She helped Minova take care of their supper dishes, then on the way to their hut, Minova looked into Fale’s eyes and said, “Go away.”

Fale came back to herself to hear Lisle explaining the current map of Alloy City. They were both leaned over the coffee table and a paper map of the city.

“Lisle,” Fale said. “It’s me. I’m back.”

“Oh,” he said. “How’s Garrith?”

“They’re going to bed.”

“Really?” He processed this news.

“Yeah. I told Minova to keep a lookout for Nelson.”

“I guess you messed up some pretty big plans of Taran’s,” Lisle said.

“Yes, I kept him from sneaking into the castle and getting himself killed,” Fale said.

“Sounds like Taran. He seems to be the type of person who would act first and think second.”

“They may have Nelson in the castle, Lisle. It may not be a bad idea for Taran to look, but I couldn’t tell his little sister.”

“So, they haven’t seen him?” Lisle asked.

“No.”

“Did she say anything else?”

“She asked me if the machine to free the people was in Garrith.”

“I hadn’t thought of it.” Lisle said.

“It couldn’t be. Gasten would need it here to get there in the first place,” Fale explained.  
“Could there be two?”

“I don’t think so. Effailya made the original machine,” Lisle said.

“How do you know?”



“Remember all the info we’re taking to Izzy and Keron?”

“Oh yeah,” her shoulders drooped in disappointment.

“Hey, don’t worry, we’ll solve it. What do I know? Izzy and Keron might have a better idea.”

She looked at him skeptically. Lisle was the smartest person she knew. “They’re probably wondering where we are,” Fale said.

“Should we go?” Lisle asked.

“Yeah,” Fale said, wondering if she’d taken too long with Lisle.

Lisle told Fale about his conversation with Taran as they walked to Izzy’s. It had been fairly boring to her, mostly about the current state of Algea and Alloy City in particular. Taran had asked a lot of questions about magic and government. Fale had never made a correlation between the two, but magic wasn’t encouraged, and hadn’t been used in public during her lifetime. She wondered if there were days when using magic was as common as eating or sleeping. Lisle continued to talk about current legislature.

As they neared Izzy’s, Fale tuned out the conversation, thinking about Minova’s hopeful face when she asked about the key. Fale hated disappointing people and she felt like it’s all she was doing lately. She hoped Keron wouldn’t be upset by how long she’d been gone.

Izzy came to the door with a daiquiri and Keron lounged on her couch, reclining with a cold drink in his hand. “Hi honey,” he said happily.

“What have you two been up to?” Fale asked.

“Talking,” Izzy said.

“Drinking,” Keron added.

“Great,” Lisle was sarcastic as he walked over to them.

“What are you talking about?” Fale asked, coming in to sit next to Keron, who put his arm on the couch behind her.

“You, of course,” Izzy volunteered gaily.

“I really hope not,” Fale’s brows pushed together.

“I learned a lot about you today.” Keron laid a hand on her shoulder and attempted to gaze in her eyes.

“Help me, Lisle,” Fale said in despair.

“I brought papers on Effailya,” Lisle changed the subject.

“Oh goody,” Izzy replied. “Whadda they say?”

Lisle laid out his folder on the table, spreading out several pages. “Some of these say the same thing,” Lisle began. “And some of it we already know.”

“Ready, set, go.” Izzy laughed.

“Should we do this another time?” Fale asked.

“No,” Keron sat up straight. “We’re good. Right, Iz?”

“Right.” Izzy sank back into her chair.

Lisle began again. “We already know about Effailya being a princess in Alloy City and spurning Gryndoll’s advances. The city was called Sorche back then. The people divided and Gryndoll somehow sent Effailya and her people to Garrith’s dimension. We don’t know how he did it, and that’s where our story stops. But here’s what I found buried in the records: Effailya is the one who made the machine in the first place and only she could run it. After she was banished to Garrith with her subjects, she was coronated as queen when her ailing father died. She lived a long life in Garrith. But on her deathbed, she used the last of her gifts to hide her

machine from Gryndoll and send her spirit to a new life in her original dimension. Here. She had been saving all her power for this last event. She came back to Alloy City and lived her life in a new body, found the key and has been waiting ever since for the right time to liberate her people. She appears to come back every eighty to ninety years to continue her search for the right time. First as Vivyan, then Corrine, and next as a child that they tried to murder in her mother's womb. But you lived. So, they changed the plan, but the new plan wasn't in the records. I'm sure it's classified information."

Lisle looked around. "Everybody got it?"

"So where is the machine?" Izzy asked. "Fale, Lisle said she hid it. Maybe your subconscious has an idea."

"I'm still figuring out who I am. I can only guess at this point, and I think Gasten has to have it," Fale said in a hollow voice, like a machine giving instructions.

"I hope they mention something about it at the council meeting tomorrow night," Lisle said.

"So, we should meet in two days again, then?" Keron asked.

"It's probably the next time I'll have anything to share," Lisle said.

"I lived a whole life in Garrith? Do I have children? The wizards have been tracking who I am? They know my names? I come back every eighty to ninety years? Is that my lifespan? They were the ones who tried to kill my mother and me? I guess I knew as much, but why? To keep me from becoming Effailya?"

"Yes?" said Izzy.

"Fale? That's a lot of questions." Lisle looked intently at Fale's pale face. Her hands were twisting in her lap.

"You're losing it, sweetheart." Keron put his drink down and held Fale to his chest.

"I'm not ready for this. I'm only Fale. Not the queen." As Fale's pulse quickened, her tangible presence in the world diminished. Her body grew transparent to the eyes of her friends until the only trace left of the lovely young woman was the sound of her voice. "I don't want to be Vivyan or Corrine. I had a hard enough time agreeing to be Effailya."

"Invisibility," Lisle whispered in incredulous wonder.

"I must be really drunk," Izzy said, "or I'm freaking out, because Fale's disappearing."

Keron looked down to see his arms wrapped around what looked like empty space; she was completely gone. "Damn. Not again," he shook her lightly. "Fale. Come back. Don't hide, it won't make it go away." They waited several minutes. "Lisle, tell her what to do," Keron said.

"Fale, can you hear me?" Lisle asked.

"I'm here," she said quietly.

"Make a blue flame," Lisle said. "Remember before, when we talked about the colors?"

"What's blue?" Keron asked.

"Trust, depend, commit," Lisle said.

A blue flame popped up in the air over Keron's lap. He resisted the urge to push it away. "Good," Lisle said to Fale. "Make it green." To Keron he said, "Green is peace, refreshing, tranquility."

The flame turned green and Fale sighed. As it burned, she began to reappear. She concentrated on the flame and forgot her problem. It was a temporary solution, at best, but successful.

"Anyone object to me taking my wife home now?" Keron asked.

Izzy said, "Of course not."

Lisle looked at his hands folded in his lap and shook his head. Keron grasped Fale's hand

and led her all the way home.

Fale held Keron's hand and made flames with the other as they walked through the marsh, being careful not to catch anything on fire. She was almost feeling perky by the time they reached the house. "Do you want to train with me?" she asked him.

Surprised by her change in mood, he answered, "Sure, but I don't know what you do."

"I'll teach you some things for a change." She grinned mischievously letting go of all her worry. She couldn't afford to be devastated by her circumstances. She needed to be strong and carefree. Keron boomed with laughter at her wiggling eyebrow. "You have to change into looser clothes," she said.

"Not a problem," he assured.

They reached their house and put on workout clothes again. "We need to do laundry tomorrow," he said.

"Agreed," Fale said. "Can we do it here? We can't risk carrying all our clothes through the city to the laundromat. We are really pushing it already."

"I'll have to see if we have any detergent in the kitchen first."

"I can check while you change," she said.

"As long as you hurry back."

She smiled. "I will."

Fale found a big box of soap flakes under the kitchen sink and a bottle of fabric softener with a bag of clothes pins. She hadn't looked around the outside of the house for a clothesline, but there must be one somewhere.

In the bedroom, Keron was pulling a t-shirt over his stomach when Fale walked in.

*Wow.*

“We’re set to wash here,” she said.

“Good.”

“I’m going to change,” she pulled her clothes out of her duffel. She could almost hear Izzy in her head laughing at her for living out of a duffel bag, but Fale never knew when she might have to run.

“Okay.” He grinned, crossing his chest with his arms. It dawned on her, he planned to stand where he was, and her face flamed.

“Fine,” she changed as slowly as possible, but refused to look at him until she was finished. She walked out of the room and looked over her shoulder at him. “Coming?” she asked, enjoying the pained look on his face.

*Serves him right.*

Keron followed her into the living room where Fale taught him jabs and kicks from her training center. The jabs were similar to what he already did when fighting, so he taught her how to uppercut. They showed each other differing styles of defense and offense, going at one another slowly. They circled each other intertwining arms and legs in dangerous revolutions.

She was proud to show him her fighting skill and wanted to tell him all about her culture. The Takanori warriors of Algea were a testament to the peace that reigned. Takanori had nothing to do with law enforcement. They were the unification compulsion. If the state of the country broke down, or there was fighting between cities, that’s when Takanori warriors from all over were called to action. Takanori taught each other about their culture; how to fight when necessary and win. Keron also liked to win. She was impressed by how quickly he learned and adapted. She soaked in the moves he taught her. A lot of their motions were similar and Fale felt a kinship with Keron as a warrior.

The sun set on their game, and they realized they were sparring in the dark. Keron spun Fale into his arms and kissed her open mouth. “Should we eat?” she asked.

“We should shower,” he kissed her again. She smiled against his lips and let him pull her into the bathroom.

Fale had never experienced such a tender touch as Keron’s mechanical hand on her back in the hot water, his kiss deepening. They let the water run cold before getting out. Clean and dry, they were putting on pajamas before finding something to eat. “Do you want me to wear my red nightgown?” Fale questioned.

“Do you want to eat or not?” he asked.

She laughed at him. “Lavender, it is.”

They made a quiche from egg substitutes and a baking mix with spinach and imitation cheese. It was easy enough to make, and they did dishes while it baked, so cleanup would be quick. “Does the magic calm you?” Keron asked.

“I guess it’s an outlet,” Fale said. “I used to get the same feeling from my meditation. The TacTrac teaches you to be a master of yourself and to be centered. I guess the magic is helping me do that. Maybe because it is coming from my center.”

“Makes sense,”

“Lisle and I need to practice it, though,” she lamented.

“Lisle’s pretty smart about stuff,” he grudgingly agreed.

“I guess he is.” Fale wondered if she should tell Keron about her conversation with Lisle this morning. She would want to know if Izzy had professed love to Keron. But he was so jealous... Fale decided not to ruin a good night. She would tell him another time.

“We’ll make sure you have time to practice tomorrow, then,” Keron said.

“Sure,” Fale said. “I’ll need it.”

After they were full, Fale rose from the table. “Why don’t you let me take care of things tonight?” she asked.

“I can do it.”

“I know you can,” she said. “You always do. You take such good care of me. Let me take care of you for a change.”

Keron sat back. “What will I do?”

“What do you want to do?” she asked. “Do you have any hobbies I don’t know about? What do you do when you’re on your own?”

“I used to play my guitar,” Keron said.

Fale was surprised. “Where is it?”

“In my apartment,” he answered. At her look of amazement, he added, “I didn’t fight all the time.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t know. I would have gotten it for you,” she said.

“It’s all right.”

“No, it’s not,” Fale despaired. “I have my weapons. You should have what you need, too.”

“It’s not your fault, Fale. How would we have gotten away that night with a guitar and not been noticed?” He spread his hands, pleading with her to understand.

“But-“ She couldn’t help but blame herself. His world had been turned upside down by her visions, and now he was doing without, all for her.



“Can I read your books?”

“Of course, you can,” she said. “I’ll do the dishes and join you.”

Keron made himself comfortable on the couch and thumbed through one of Lisle’s books on mages while Fale washed the dishes. When she finished, she sat in the curve of his hip and nestled into his side to read the other book. She looked for anything about gifts that would help her to conjure up an object from thin air, like maybe a guitar; but she found nothing. Fale did find an interesting section on gifts, though, that mentioned projection. Not only using a gift on yourself, but projecting it onto another object. Making something else invisible, for instance. This fascinated Fale. If she could make other things invisible... what could she do? She could hide something important. She could take the machine.

Keron shut his book. “I’m still getting used to the idea of magic,” he said. “It’s strange there’s a whole family of people who think nothing of it, living around me.”

“I think a lot of them live in the mountains,” Fale said. “They aren’t disturbed there.”

“That’s what I would do.”

“I wonder if Lucien comes from the mountains or the city,” she wondered aloud.

“Hmm. He’s a sharp dresser,” Keron said. “Maybe the city, but Ash’s manners are more rural.” He grinned broadly.

Fale took his book and set them both on the coffee table. “I owe you a back rub,” she said. *My turn to torture you.* Keron was unsure and squinted his eyes, but Fale knelt behind him and pulled up on his t-shirt. “Raise your arms,” she instructed. He obeyed reluctantly and she reached up to tug it off, tossing the shirt next to her. Fale looked at his back like an artist with a blank parchment. Where should she start? She placed her hands lightly on his shoulders, gripping the muscle there and rolling it with her thumbs. She mimicked all the movements he had made on her, walking her fingers along his spine in circles. She used her knuckles on the tight knots in his

shoulder blades and was rewarded with a soft groan. She felt like she was forming a work of art with a hunk of malleable clay. She kneaded down Keron's arm to his bicep and over his shoulders to his chest, fanning her fingertips into his flesh. He lay his head back on her shoulder and enjoyed her touch.

"Fale, what are you doing?"

"Seducing you. Is it working?"

"Yes." He pulled her face to his and kissed her soundly. Fale's belly began to heat up. "Come here."

Still on her knees, she moved around the side of him and Keron wrapped his fingers around her body pulling her onto her on his lap. She held his face in her hands and kissed him with all her heart. "I want you."

"Here?" he asked.

"Here."

They melted together, removing all obstacles that lie between them, magic and otherwise. He guided her and she breathed in his every word; until she couldn't stand it anymore and her flames burned fiery red.

## CHAPTER 15

The sun was high above the horizon. Fale stretched languidly, gripping the headboard. “Do we have to get up?”

“No,” Keron said, perusing her body.

She beamed at him. “Kiss me?”

“Gladly.” He leaned over and kissed her wickedly. His lips played upon hers, then snuck down to her neck, and he kissed his way back to her mouth.

“We’ll never get up if you do that,” she said against his lips.

“Exactly.” He gently pulled her bottom lip with his teeth.

She snickered. “You’re evil.”

“Actually, I’m very, very good.”

“Conceited, you mean.”

“Just confident,” he contradicted with a smile.

“Let’s do laundry,” she said.

“Ugh. You are no fun at all.” He reached for her, but she scooted to the side.

She laughed and threw the covers away, getting out of bed. She turned around when he didn’t move. “Aren’t you coming?”

He raised up on one elbow, watching her, “Not yet.” Keron waited for her to get dressed and then got up. “Want quiche for breakfast?”

“Sure,” she said.

“I’ll warm it up. You gather laundry.”

Fale was in the kitchen when she saw it. The shortest vision she'd had yet. *It was a giant clock. A ticking clock. One that seemed to speed up as she watched it.* She didn't know what to make of it. She would have to think about it.

They spent the morning washing clothes in the kitchen sinks. Outside, on the northeast corner of the house, there was a clothesline and they hung their laundry to dry. Fale decided to practice her powers in the afternoon, on Keron's prodding. "I still think we should go back to your apartment for your guitar," she said.

"It's probably gone, Fale."

"Why? It's only been a few days."

"I can't imagine Control doesn't have a trap there by now. Please drop it."

"Fine. If you insist," she pouted.

"I do."

"What's on the table?" she asked.

"Looks like a piece of paper." He walked to the coffee table and picked it up. She watched him read it.

"Well?"

"It's an invitation to meet some city mages today." He turned the paper to the side and continued to study it.

"Are they coming here?" she asked.

"No." He pressed his lips together. "They live in Applegate Apartments."

"That's across the city." She stepped next to him and held the paper, curious as to what he had seen. There was a map on the page showing the way to the mages' apartment.

“I don’t have a good feeling about this,” he said.

“Lucien wouldn’t magically send us an invitation if it wasn’t safe,” she reasoned.

“How do you know it’s from Lucien? It could be a trap. I’m not sure he would send us into the city.”

“Not unless it was important. Do you think they know something about Nelson or the machine?” she asked.

“Maybe they can help you with your powers?”

“There’s only one way to find out.” She folded the paper and put it in her pocket. “Let’s go now. I want to see what they have to say.”

“Can you stay invisible for long?”

“I can try. The longest I’ve done it is half an hour. Why? What are you thinking?”

“I can disguise myself and blend in, but I want you to stay invisible through the city. We’ll scope the place out first. I’ll go in and say I’m alone, but I want you to stay close to me, until we know it’s safe.” He looked confident in his plan, but when he went to his toolbox for his knife and mallet, Fale knew how nervous he was.

They made it to Applegate Apartments undetected by walking around the city, behind the University buildings, rather take the shortcut down main street. Fale walked around the complex, looking for any of Gasten’s men, but found nothing.

“We’re all set,” she whispered.

“Why are you whispering?” Keron chuckled.

“Sshhh. I’m not supposed to be here.”

“Okay,” he whispered conspiratorially.

“Stop talking to me.” She hit his arm. He laughed at her.

Keron found the apartment and knocked on the door. A man in his forties opened the door. He looked surprised. Keron cleared his throat. “I’m Brock Palmquist. Ah, did I come at a bad time?”

The man shook his head and smiled. “No, no, not at all. Come in. We were expecting you and your wife.”

Keron walked in slowly to give Fale time to sneak around him. The man’s hair was short and styled, and he wore dress slacks with his button-up shirt. The apartment was spotless and smelled faintly of lemons, coinciding with the soft yellow decor. A woman came out of the kitchen, wiping her hands on a towel. “Oh, they’re here,” she said. “Is your wife coming?”

“I’m afraid it’s just me, Mr., uh-”

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” the man said. “I’m Teague, this is my wife, Charlette, and we have a thirteen-year-old daughter, Krichelle. This is Brock, dear.”

Charlette waved the men into the family room and ushered Keron to the sofa. Fale stood quietly inside the doorway, keeping as still as possible. “What can we do for you?”

“We received an invitation to visit,” Keron answered. “I was hoping you could tell me why I’m here.”

The couple laughed lightly. Teague sat in a reclining chair and folded his hands across his stomach. “We are mages who work for the Control agency.”

Keron shot up, ready to run, but Charlette stood in the doorway. “We offer no harm.” She smiled warmly at him. “We are covert agents.”

“Do sit. Please,” Teague said to Keron. “We have been watching you. Protecting you, if you will.”

Keron sat, but didn’t relax like he had before. “Are you the ones who have been funding

us?”

“Among other things. Haven’t you wondered why Control hasn’t been to the house?” Charlette asked.

Keron had wondered how safe they were, but apparently, there was more to the story. “Go on.”

“It is often used by mountain mages who need to be in the city for a few days. The house is heavily warded. In fact, it is invisible to anyone who does not have mage blood.”

“How am I able to see it, then?” Keron asked.

The couple looked at each other and shrugged. “Are you sure you do not have mage in you?” Teague asked.

“Sure, I... Um, actually, I never knew who my father was.” Keron did not like the way this conversation was going. “So, you’re saying that people have been out there looking for us, but couldn’t see us?”

“Exactly.” Teague looked kindly at Keron. Charlette returned to the kitchen.

“Wow. Thank you.” Keron was humbled at the lengths these mages had gone to for Fale.

“It is our pleasure to be of assistance to our queen.”

Charlette returned with mugs and a steaming pot. “We were hoping to meet you and your wife to see how else we may offer help. And to let you know of the queen’s regime. There are many of us throughout the city who have been working and waiting for your wife to come to power.”

A teenaged girl entered the room. “Honey, this is Mr. Palmquist.”

“Why is that lady standing by the door?” She chewed a piece of candy loudly, popping a bubble.

Keron looked worried.

“She’s not comfortable with us yet,” Teague said in a fatherly tone.

Fale let her invisibility drop and Charlette smiled at her. “You are welcome to come have a seat. Do you like tea?”

“Yes,” Fale answered in a shaky voice. “How did she know I was there?”

Charlette tittered. “We have the ability to see through others’ magic.”

“It’s what brought us together,” Teague added.

“And we passed it on, to our daughter.”

“Oh, my stars, this story again?” Krishelle rolled her eyes. “Can I go meet my friends?”

“If your school work is done,” her mother answered.

“You tutor your child?” Fale asked. “I was tutored too, at the TacTrac.”

“Yes,” Charlette said, as Krishelle sprinted out the front door. “We encouraged Krishelle to use her magic from an early age, but we were afraid to put her in public classes in case she developed other powers. Or threw fireballs at anyone. She has her father’s temperament.”

“I am *passionate*,” he corrected his wife with a grin. She laughed.

“How long have you been working with Control?” Fale asked.

“Since your father was killed,” Teague said kindly. “We were stationed in high-level positions, as transfers from another city, to provide intel on the current status of the wizards and their involvement with the Agency. Killing your father was one of Source Wizard Sirius’s last orders. Things were uneventful for the years between his death and the induction of his son, Gasten. Unfortunately, once Gasten realized your machine could supply him with limitless power, he sought you out. He has been waiting for your powers to be revealed.”

“Why?” Fale asked.



“To see if you would take on the challenge of finding the machine. He believes you know where it is.”

“I don’t have any idea.”

“We think he means to capture you and use a spell to draw it from your consciousness, then take the key and find it himself,” Teague said.

Fale’s heel bounced up and down excitedly. Keron put his hand on her leg to calm her.

“We didn’t mean to upset you, dear. We want to know how we can help?” Charlette said.

“It’s okay,” Fale’s nervous smile appeared more like a grimace. “We appreciate all you’ve done so far. I’m not sure I’m cut out for this. I didn’t ask for any of it. I don’t want it this bad.”

“You’ll do it for Nelson... and because you do what’s right and responsible.” Keron spoke softly to her.

“Yes.” She hung her head, suddenly tired of the weight she bore.

The front door slammed, making them all jump. Krishelle stood against the door with her hands braced on the wood, a wild look in her eyes. “Help me!” she yelled. “They’re after me!”

“Hold on,” Teague was up in an instant to protect his daughter. “Who is after you?”

“Some men from Control. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to,” she looked desperately from one parent to another.

“What did you do?” Her mother was aghast.

“I didn’t mean to start trouble, but I saw their pictures and I wanted the money...”

“Krishelle, you didn’t,” her mother cried.

“When I told agents they were at my house, they tried to grab me, but I got away,” Krishelle’s tears slid off her chin.

“Did they scan you?” her father asked, but Krishelle was beside herself.

*“Did they scan you?”* he asked again, louder.

The girl nodded and sniffled loudly. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

Teague turned to Keron and Fale. “You’re not safe here. Come with me.” He walked into one of the bedrooms and they followed.

Fale heard a banging at the door as Teague lifted the grate on an ancient fireplace. The banging grew louder. “This is Control. Open the door. You are surrounded.”

Fale’s eyes grew wider. Teague ignored them and leaned down to push the brick wall behind the fireplace. It gave way and scraped the ground as it opened to a dark hole. Fale was shaking her head as she backed up. The only thing that scared her more than heights, was small spaces. “You’ll have to crawl through here for about eight feet, then you’ll be able to climb a ladder down. Don’t fall. This goes all the way to the sewer. Take the tunnel to your right, and you’ll come out just south of the mall.”

“I can’t do it,” Fale cried, with her hands up, as if she could push away the idea of the hole.

“Hurry!” Teague said.

Keron pushed Fale down and led her to the opening. “What about you?” she asked Teague.

“We’ll be fine. Now go.”

“I’m right behind you. Come on, Fale Valine, I need you to do this,” Keron assured her and pushed her from behind into the passageway.

A great boom sounded from the other room, the door had been blasted open.

*Magic.*

She crawled as fast as she could. The brick wall slid shut, sealing her and Keron in darkness. They heard yelling and arguing through the wall, but the words weren’t clear. Fale tried to breathe, but her lungs were closing, cramping, expelling all her air and she couldn’t draw

any in. She felt Keron's hand on her foot and he squeezed it twice, to show his support.

"Make a flame," he whispered.

Fale opened her palm and a disc of light showed her the way. It wasn't far, but full of spiders. She shivered. When they got to the ladder, she had to maneuver her body around and get her feet pointed down. "You can do this," Keron whispered. "I'm right here with you."

Fale smelled the sewer below and breathed through her mouth. She put out her fire so she could hold onto the ladder. One wrong move and she would bounce down three stories into who knows what. She had never been in a sewer. It had never dawned on her that other people had, but she was grateful for the way out. Slowly they descended. One rung at a time.

At the bottom, Fale dropped into a stream of putrid, knee-high water. As she gagged, she had a feeling she had done this before. "Which way do we go?"

"He said to go right."

"Yeah, but from which direction? When you get off the ladder, there's only forward or backward," Fale was still whispering.

"I don't think they can hear us down here," Keron said.

"That way leads to main street, so let's go this way," she summoned another flame and pointed behind them.

"I'll follow you."

The tunnel eventually came to another ladder. "Should we go up here?" she asked.

"Ssshhh, listen." They heard splashing from a distance. "I don't think we're the only ones down here."

Fale jumped up to reach the ladder and Keron pushed her foot up. She climbed quickly,

and he was right behind her. At the top of the ladder was a flat door. She pushed up, but it didn't budge. "I can't move it," she whispered down to him.

"I'm going to climb over you. Hang on tight."

She clung to the ladder and he stepped up so his feet were on the same rung, outside hers. His hands skimmed up her body, making her shiver. He grasped the bar above her head with his left hand and pushed upward with his valezsan arm. The door creaked. The splashing was getting louder.

"Hurry," she said quietly.

He pushed again, and the door creaked once more, opening slightly. Fale inhaled the fresh air and filled her lungs. Keron heaved the door open and there was a crash above them. The splashing steps quickened. He climbed over her and pulled himself out, into an alcove in the center of the mall, near the orange lockers. Reaching a hand down, he hauled Fale out of the hole and set her on her feet. A large metal trashcan had been sitting on top of the trap door and had fallen over when they opened it. Flashlights shined up the passageway from below.

"Stop!"

They heard someone yell from the tunnel. Keron closed the door and pushed the trashcan back over the top, using his weight.

They peeked out of the alcove into the mall. It was nearing evening and the musical University students were gathering to beat drums and sing. They passed the others and walked quickly down the stairs.

"Hide yourself," he told her when they had reached the street. Fale pulled on her invisibility like a suit, and they walked straight home.

"You need to practice your powers," Keron told her when they reached the house.

"I don't have anything to heal or destroy." Fale crossed her arms.

"Destroy our trash."

Fale disintegrated all their trash, practicing not only touching it, but trying to point at it from a few steps away. That didn't work at all. They had an argument over whether she should be allowed to cut herself to attempt healing the wounds, or if Keron should be a guinea pig, and decided to skip the healing gift for the present. Then Fale practiced making different parts of herself disappear and reappear. She attempted making other objects invisible, but only succeeded in giving herself a monster headache.

"Are you ready to eat?" Keron called from the kitchen. He had used the rest of their spinach to make salads and toasted bread. "We'll have to go to the grocery again, Sprout."

"We can go tomorrow when we go to Izzy's," she answered.

They ate and washed dishes together, watching each other. "We can't stay here forever," Fale said. "What do you think will happen to us?"

"I have no idea," Keron said, hanging up his towel. "What are you thinking?"

"I get the feeling we're running out of time."

"Time for what?"

"That's all I know. I can see a ticking clock and something is coming," she said.

"Do you see what's coming?"

"Change. An ending or a beginning. Maybe it's us."

"It could be the beginning of a solution. Or maybe an end to all this running. Maybe it has something to do with the beginning of our lives together; all I know is, we're not ending," he tried to reassure her.

"How do you know?" She couldn't give up the worry that she was feeling a shadow of

future disappointment.

“I know how I feel about you.” His husky voice melted her insides.

“Do you still want to keep me?” she asked.

“Come here,” he pulled her close. “Of course, I do. That hasn’t changed.”

“I’m not sure,” she said.

Keron gazed at her, concern written on his features. “Fale?” he asked. “Is there something you’re not telling me? Did you have a vision?”

“Nothing serious. Just time passing,” she said.

“Let’s go to bed early. If we only have a little while here, we might as well enjoy it.”

Fale awoke early the next morning to meditate, leaving Keron asleep in the pre-dawn. She cleared her mind of all her concerns. Getting answers could wait. She needed to find a calm peace in her core. She imagined a warm summer rain washing away every problem. Then she basked in the warmth of serenity. She felt much better once she was centered and began making flatcakes. She had a tall stack made and a pot of coffee ready when Keron poked his bedhead in the kitchen.

“Why are you up?” he asked with one eye closed.

“It’s morning,” she said brightly.

“Hardly,” he groaned.

Fale laughed. “Come eat. I made you breakfast.”

“Need. Coffee.”

“It’s right here, sleepyhead,” she said.

“Why are you so cheerful?” he asked.

“No reason.” She kissed his shoulder as he walked by to sit at the table.

Keron smiled. “I like this Fale. She’s just a little early,” he mumbled.

She laughed, piling his plate with flatcakes and smothering them with buttery flavored syrup. “Are you feeling better about things this morning?” Keron asked.

“Much better,” Fale answered.

“What changed?”

“I’m not sure. I still feel like something is coming, but I’m not afraid of it anymore.”

“Good,” he said. “Whatever it is, we can conquer it.”

Fale thought it might be more serious than that, but she didn’t want to cast doubt on Keron, so she didn’t say anything. She simply poured coffee and sat down to eat.

After breakfast, Keron showered and Fale brought in the laundry. They folded together and talked about their plans for the day. Working together, they were done in no time. “How many credits do we have?” she asked.

“My band had a thousand credits on it at the guest house, but then it had a thousand again at the liquor store and the drug store, too. Either the credits don’t really come off, or Teague keeps replenishing them so we have a thousand all the time,” Keron explained.

“Good,” she said. “I want to go to the store this morning then, before we meet Izzy and Lisle.” Fale was afraid of getting caught in the city, but she was determined to master her fear. Nelson had always taught her to face her fears, so she wanted to go on with life, like she wasn’t in danger.

“We can go-“ Keron began.

“Alone,” Fale interrupted.

“Fale. It’s not safe.”

“What will you do if I’m caught by Control, Keron? Fight our way out? They’ll be expecting that,” she said.

“But together-“

“We’re more recognizable,” she said grimly.

“You’re going to do this no matter what I say, aren’t you?” he asked.

“Please, Keron?”

“Are you asking my permission?”

“No, I guess not. But I don’t want you to be mad at me,” she pleaded. She ached at the thought of his anger, but knew she could take care of herself. In disguise, Fale didn’t look a thing like herself and wore a fake identification band. What could go wrong?

“If you don’t want to upset me, don’t leave without me.”

“I’ll meet you at Izzy’s for lunch, I promise,” she said with her palms pressed together in prayer pose. “I’ll even get us something to eat from the pub.”

Keron sighed in defeat. “If you really have to, I’ll take-“

“Wings?” she asked with a wink.

“Right.” He smiled wanly. He was frustrated at her lack of concern about being in public, especially alone. She wasn’t as invincible as she thought. Disguised or not, he didn’t like her taking chances.

“Thank you. I’ll be careful, I promise. Nothing bad will happen.”

Fale dressed quickly and set out across the marsh. She had thought Keron was never going to let her go as he stood on the front porch, holding her. “I’ll see you at Izzy’s by noon,” he’d



said.

She'd kissed him on her tip-toes and swore not to talk to strangers. Fale had disentangled herself and bound off the porch into the muck. She walked to the city's edge going straight to the back of Keron's apartment. She was going to attempt climbing up to his balcony, but it was not only too high, the hole she'd made had been patched. Keron was right, they weren't going to make it easy. She was probably being observed. Fale kept walking. She was about to turn west when an idea slapped her in the face. Quickly, she rounded the corner of the building and made herself invisible. She walked to the front of Keron's apartment, casting glances in all directions, but the people who passed her in the street didn't sense her at all. She was giddy with freedom, *why don't I do this all the time?* She carefully searched the grounds for anyone suspicious or loitering, but there was no one.

Fale stood up with her shoulders back, and boldly walked up to Keron's front door. She didn't know what she was doing, or what she expected, but when she turned the knob it slowly clicked open. She froze. This was too convenient. She waited for a full minute and when nothing happened, she inched the door into the room, releasing the breath she had been holding. Everything was gone; except for the furniture. Clothes and towels had been on Keron's floor; pizza boxes and beer bottles on his coffee table; and trash overflowing the bin. Where her apartment had been torn apart, his had been sifted through and apparently stuffed into tall black bags along the wall. Fale looked for the guitar, but didn't see it. When she walked further into the room she noticed a man sitting on the couch, a cap on his head and his chin tucked to his chest. His eyes were closed and his hands crossed his stomach where they held a small pistol.

Fale gasped and the man's eyes flew open. He looked over his shoulder to see the door ajar and grinned. Fale backed up against the wall going into the kitchen, watching him. He pulled a small box out of his pocket, pushed a button with his thumb and spoke into it.

"Yeah, this here's Birt. We got some activity." He took his thumb off the button and turned

his head to the side to hear from the box.

“Well? What happened?” The voice coming through the box made Fale shiver. The tone was rich and authoritative, and annoyed. Was that the Source Wizard Gasten?

“Somebody opened the door and I knowed I heard somebody breathing,” Birt added hastily, “sir.”

“Was the breathing in the room with you or outside?” the box asked. Fale covered her mouth with her hand, she needed to get out of there. *Now.*

“Couldn’t tell.”

“I’ll send a few men to your location to scout the area. Search the apartment. You know what to do when you find them. I will be there later.” The man was mid-sigh when he clicked off.

Fale was about to make a run for it, when Birt closed the door again and locked it. *Crap.* She would have to be silent as she left and unlock the door too? He was awake now; she started to sweat. It was then she realized she hadn’t found the guitar. She stepped lightly through the kitchen and into Keron’s bedroom. *There it is.* A tattered gray case leaned in the far corner of the room and she rushed to it like two magnets pulling toward each other. She eased the brass clasps up and looked toward the door to make sure Birt was still in the other room, then she swung the loose hinges wide. The guitar was in bad shape, it was worn and cracked in the places she could see. This was not an instrument worthy of Keron, but he deserved to have his own things. *How am I ever going to get this out of here?*

Contemplating her options, Fale considered lowering it out the window by the balcony. The guitar would never make it though, not in the shape it was in. She couldn’t carry it out the front door. She wasn’t successful yet with cloaking herself, as well as large objects. She was still thinking when Birt’s box crackled to life in the living room.

“Hey Birt. Seen anything? Me and Jare are almost to ya.”

“Nah,” Birt said. “I ain’t seen them yet, but they’s around, I knowed it.”

“Yeah? You’s a wizard now, too? We gettin’ hungry. Got anythin’ to eat?” the voice in the box asked. Definitely not the Source Wizard now.

Fale heard Birt walk into the kitchen and open cabinets, throwing bags and cans around. He opened the fridge and rustled something plastic, then spoke with something in his mouth, “I got food. And I knows what I knows, so shut up. Somebody gotta opened the door, and it weren’t no wind blowin’ outside, I heard breathing.”

A knock sounded at the door followed by a rattle of the knob, then pounding.

“I’m comin’!” yelled Birt, stomping across the floor and unbolting the lock.

“You’re supposed to be leavin’ that open, in case...” a new voice spoke into the room.

“I knows, I knows. Get in here afore somebody sees ya,” Birt said.

“Jare’s scoutin’ once more, then we’s gonna eat,” the new voice was young, maybe even someone Fale’s age. She didn’t have time to think about it, though. She needed to get out of the apartment. The guitar would have to stay, but she had an idea about that. Assuming she could get out of Keron’s apartment before the Source Wizard showed up. He would sense her presence for sure.

Fale kept her back to the wall and slithered from one room to the next until she was back in the living room. The men were lounging on the couch and chair; and they were filthy. She felt sorry for the furniture. Where did Gasten find these men? They could barely speak the language. Were they from another city? Another dimension? It didn’t matter, when the third man came in, Fale would slip out and be on her way.

“You ever seen her?” the younger man asked Birt.

He grunted, “She’s jus’ another one o’ them mages. Nothin special.” He tipped back his

head and poured his ale down his throat like a professional drinker.

“I heard she was a beauty, and the mentor said when I catches her I can do what I want to her.” His grin made Fale’s skin crawl.

“Nah. Her mother been a beauty. Fale only be good for raising half - breed mages,” Birt chuckled. “I would put her down and...” He pushed his hand down and proceeded to make lewd motions with his hips that riled up the boy. Birt smiled and Fale stiffened at the talk of her mother.

“Woo hoo. You tame her good, Birt,” he said, but there was a gleam in his eyes.

*That is so not going to be me. I’ve been too helpless in the past. I was so sheltered before, but now that I am thrust into this world, it’s a dark, dark place. But you know what? I am sufficient to combat this darkness.*

“You makin me nervous boy, grinnin’ like that.” Birt set down his ale.

“I’m gonna kill the fantocci then I be doin’ what I want to the brown-haired princess while she’s under me,” the boy vowed with so much venom, Fale found it hard to breathe. She was incensed. No one was going to kill Keron on her watch. She stalked over to the boy and looked him dead in the eyes. She opened her mouth; she wanted to tell him what he could do with his beliefs, but he stared back at where she stood and narrowed his gaze.

Fale slipped in her invisibility. Then all hell broke loose.

“She’s here!” the boy shouted and lunged forward as Fale immediately returned to her invisible state and punched him in the face for everything he’d said before. She flipped herself over the back of the couch and ran for the door.

“Jare!” someone yelled, presumably into their radio boxes.

The door swung open, banging into the wall and a huge man stood in the center of the opening like a five-point star filling the doorway. “What?”

Fale almost slid to a stop, but dove between his wide set legs instead. He felt her pass and tried to catch her with his meaty hands, but he couldn't react fast enough. She repressed a half-crazed giggle as she stumble-ran across the landing toward the stairs. The men ran after her, shouting, but she kept her shield of invisibility and they couldn't tell where she went. Fale was grateful for the silent concrete that met the soles of her shoes with a grip, pull, and release. She ducked into the nearest alcove and let them pass her by.

*Whew. That was too close. Maybe I am taking too many chances.*

She watched them running about like headless chickens, searching around nearby corners.

*Idiots.*

She stayed to listen to them talking, but no one said anything of value, though it was clear they were terrified of their leader and being caught empty-handed.

## CHAPTER 16

Fale waited until the men had gone back to Keron's apartment to regroup, and traveled to the plaza shops, still early enough to beat the weight of the late morning crowds. She made herself visible in a quiet alley and stepped trepidatiously into the sun. When she knew she wasn't being followed, she went to a music store. There she spent half an hour carefully choosing an acoustic guitar in a deep red wood with six strings and a thin body. As soon as Fale picked it up however, the store attendant was instantly at her side.

"How can I help you, Miss?" he asked and tipped his head to look at her with a patronizing smile.

"I'm looking for a guitar."

"Any particular one? We have some used ones on sale," he made a point to look at Fale from head to toe, and took in her clothing, splattered with mud from the marsh.

"I'm not sure. I don't play. Something not electric. I think I like this one," she ran her hand over the smooth wood of the instrument in her hand, causing the attendant to cringe.

"I don't think you'll want to start on this one, miss, it's rather expensive and not for beginners."

"How does it sound? Can you play it?" she asked.

Looking insulted, he took the instrument from Fale, "Of course I can." The salesman played several rich chords and a short bit of fretting.

"How much is it?" Fale asked.

The attendant smiled viciously, "Seven hundred credits."

"Thank you," Fale said, taking back the guitar.

“Shall I return it for you?” his smug smile infuriated her.

“No, I’ll take it. For my husband,” she said confidently.

*I am Bryla Palmquist. I am older and richer than you think I am. Respect me.* She wasn’t in the mood today, and Keron was going to get this guitar.

The attendant quickly changed his demeanor. “Oh. Yes, ma’am,” he said. “The case is over here. Will you be needing any other accessories?”

“Nothing *you* can help me with,” Fale said haughtily, trying not to smile. She had never been so rude in her life, but she was being Bryla, not Fale.

“Yes ma’am.” The salesman looked chagrined. Fale reminded herself he would be earning her commission and she didn’t feel bad. By the time she scanned her wrist band, she had spent forty-five minutes in the shop, so Fale headed to the pub. She would be eternally grateful to the mages for her new identity. The scanners didn’t seem to alert Control that Bryla was not real. Thank the stars for the mages within the Agency system.

Fale experienced an independence and strength she’d never felt before. She’d been taught to take care of herself, but she’d never been allowed to do it until now. She decided to make some changes in her life. She was going to become the true Takanori warrior she’d always wanted to be. Even if it killed her. She looked down, at the guitar she carried. Keron wouldn’t be happy with her for what happened today and the decisions she had made, but she had to do more, take more risks. Like being out in public right now. She knew the wizards’ men were looking for her, but they were also looking for another version of her, not Bryla. Well, they had been. She could only hope in the few seconds they saw her in Keron’s apartment, they were too stunned to notice the difference in her hair. They weren’t the brightest lot.

Fale entered the pub with a new sense of purpose. She strode to the bar and rested her guitar case on the stool next to her. She almost greeted the bartender as if she knew him, but remembered she was supposed to be hiding. She slipped her sunglasses back on.

Ordering two sets of wings to go, she had a drink while she waited. Fale sat with her back to the bar and watched people come in the door, looking for anyone of her friends. She listened to the music and tapped her foot to the beat. Seeing no one, she turned back to the bar. "Your orders are up." The bartender handed her two boxes and a tab. Fale scanned her wristband and saw a thousand credits reappear. She smiled and thanked the man, taking her boxes and instrument with her.

Fale was early. She was sure she would beat Keron to Izzy's, but when she got there, he was already planted on the couch. "Why are you here?" she asked.

"Got nervous," he said. "What did you do?" he pointed to the case. "You didn't go to my apartment, did you?"

"Well, your place had the balcony fixed so I kept walking."

"Fale," Izzy groaned.

"So, I went to the Plaza and bought you a new one. Surprise." She held up the case. "And wings."

Keron looked unsure of what to do. "Well?" Fale asked. "What?"

"Don't know whether to strangle you or kiss you," he said.

"Kiss me?" Fale blushed a rosy pink.

"Not here," Izzy said.

"Let me see it," Keron said excitedly, sitting back.

Fale set the boxes on the coffee table and laid the case on his lap, clicking open the clasps and lifting the lid.

"Whoa," Keron said in appreciation. He gently lifted the guitar out by its neck. "It's



gorgeous, Fale. Mine was a piece of crap. I can't take this."

"You have to," she said forcefully. "It's a gift. You don't turn away a gift."

"Thank you," he looked at her with longing.

"Find a room, you two," Izzy said. "No, don't."

Fale laughed. "I miss you, Iz."

"Yeah, we haven't had much alone time lately," Izzy said.

"You've made me over twice in the last two weeks," Fale said

"Doesn't count. They were both completely necessary. I want to spend some time with you, just being us. I'll even read a book, if you'll hang out with me."

"Soon," Fale promised.

Keron and Fale ate their lunch at the coffee table and talked with Izzy until Lisle came crashing through the door.

"Hey, Lisle," Fale said.

"H-hey."

"What's wrong?" Izzy asked.

"What's not wrong? I need to leave. Where do I go? I don't know what I'm doing here," Lisle babbled, running his hands through his hair and pulling it into messy spikes. His face was pale and his brows were drawn together.

"Slow down. What happened? Did you go to the council meeting?" Fale asked.

"Yes," Lisle affirmed.

"Did you get something?" Keron asked.

"Uh huh."

“Do you know where the machine is?” Fale asked.

“Not exactly, but I know where it isn’t.” He looked around the room at anything but the three faces who were counting on him for information.

“Spit it out, man,” Keron said.

“Come in here, Lisle, and sit down,” Izzy gestured to another chair.

“Where does Gasten have the machine?” Fale asked.

“He doesn’t have it,” Lisle pulled a hand down his face.

“But how is he transporting machines?” Keron asked.

“And Nelson?” Izzy added.

“He has a spell that will take one or two people at most between dimensions.”

“Hmmm. I guess we could try to find a spell like it, but once they caught onto us, who knows what those monsters would do to punish the remaining slaves. We need to free all the people of Garrith at once,” Fale observed. “That’s why we need the machine.”

“Gasten wants it, too,” Lisle said.

“What for?” Izzy asked.

“So, he can take his whole army of machines into new dimensions. He wants to wage battles and take over weaker people. He can absorb their magic and become more powerful,” Fale volunteered.

“OMS,” Izzy said. “Is it why they’re helpless against him? Effailya and her family were mages, but how many of her followers were, too? Does he drain all their power?”

“That’s it exactly. But it’s not enough, he wants to conquer and corrupt other dimensions,” Lisle agreed.

“You sure about all this?” Keron asked.

Lisle looked offended. "It was a small council. I heard everything they said. I was sitting in as an apprentice in the back and heard them talking. The spell is called Aperio."

"No one doubts you, Lisle. It just begs the question, where *is* the machine? And will we know it when we see it?" Fale looked sideways at Keron.

"You were a wreck when you got here. What're you so worried about?" Keron asked Lisle.

"There was a guy who followed me here," Lisle said.

"Lisle, no," Izzy exclaimed. "And you led him to my place?"

"What does it mean?" he asked. "Do they suspect me? I sent them the wrong direction and looked up files on Effailya. And I don't know what they've 'seen' in visions. Have you had any visions or anything at all, Fale?"

"Not much, but I have a feeling," she said.

"What kind of feeling?" Lisle asked.

"Like something is ending, but I don't know what. There's a beginning, too, but I think that's for me. I can't be sure," Fale tried to explain.

"How so?"

"Maybe I am beginning a new chapter here? My time to take action is coming and I'm getting ready for it," Fale said.

"Don't you mean *we*?" Izzy asked.

"No, it would be my responsibility to these people *if* I decide to fight for them." Fale felt the mages represented all the family she'd never had. As much as she loved and appreciated Nelson, missing her real family had plagued her. Now it felt like she had a big one, and it was her new duty to protect them, even though she wasn't sure if she could do it. She wasn't absolutely sure she wanted to.

“We’re still here to help you, right guys?” Izzy said.

Fale looked at the two men, who both looked worried. “Thanks, Izzy,” Fale said. “What should we do about Lisle? We have to keep him safe.”

“Who knows if they have someone watching my apartment,” Izzy said. “I mean, my parents work for Control, but you made it sound like these guys aren’t from around here.”

“They’ll be watching now,” Keron said, “if someone followed Lisle here.”

“We won’t be able to meet anymore,” Fale said.

“There’s not much more information I can get anyway,” Lisle said. “They don’t know anything we don’t know. It’s a race to find the machine at this point.” He let out a sigh of defeat.

“But nobody knows how,” Izzy said. “What are we going to be able to do now with Lisle being watched?”

“Why don’t we take him back with us today?” Fale asked Keron. “We can hide him at the house.”

Keron looked uncertain. “How? Fale, we haven’t really talked about this.”

“What’s there to talk about? Lisle needs us. You agreed he could sleep on the couch if things got sketchy. I’d say this counts. They must know Lisle sent them looking in the wrong direction for us. If he’s being followed, he needs us to protect him,” she said. “No offense, Lisle.”

“We don’t even know our next move,” Keron countered.

“Let’s take him for a couple of nights, long enough to lose his tail, then we’ll come back to meet Izzy at the pub and recheck the situation,” Fale suggested. “She can tell us if she’s seen anyone lurking by then.”

“Good idea,” Izzy said.

“I’ll do it,” Lisle said.

“Stop agreeing with her all the time. She is reckless enough already,” Keron said to Lisle and Izzy. He met all their determined faces one by one, threw his hands up and exhaled loudly. “Okay. How do we do this, mastermind?”

Fale ignored his outburst. “First, you two get Lisle’s bags. You are the best at hiding and at losing a follower. When you guys are gone, I’ll go back on my own,” Fale suggested.

“I don’t like it,” Keron complained.

“You don’t have to,” Fale said, full of confidence.

“Will it work?” Lisle asked.

“Of course, it will,” Fale crossed her arms. “The guy will follow you once you leave and Keron can lose him before you guys get to the marsh.”

“Hopefully,” Keron had his doubts.

“I’ll take your guitar,” Fale said to Keron. “Maybe you should go now, before this guy is joined by others.”

“Okay,” Lisle said, rising. “If you’re sure you’ll be all right. There really is no turning back for me now. I’m in this up to my neck, so count me as one of your team.”

“Thanks, Lisle,” Fale said sincerely.

Keron stared at her. “You’d better be at the house when we get there,” he said sternly.

“I will be,” she said.

“Do you have your dagger?” Lisle asked.

“It’s in my bag, why?”

“Have your hand on it,” Keron said.

“Okay, I will. Are you guys happy?” Fale asked.

“I feel better,” Izzy said.

“I’ll be fine everybody,” Fale said. “Now go.”

Lisle led Keron out the door and Fale relaxed.

“You’re spicy today,” Izzy said. “I like it.”

“It’s the new, improved me. I’m tired of being sheltered. I’ve been through too much, Iz. It’s time to prove how strong I am.” Fale hadn’t liked the way the guys had treated her, like she was a weak and needy girl. She vowed to herself not to be so helpless and to work harder to master her feelings and reactions.

“You show them. You are Takanori.”

Fale wanted to beat the men back to the house, so she didn’t stay long. Gathering Keron’s guitar, she slung her shoulder bag across her body and stepped into the doorway. “I’ll see you soon, Iz.” Fale hugged her friend with her free arm. “Meet us at the pub in two days, same time, unless you hear from us first.”

“Be careful,” she said.

“Of course,” Fale slipped her right hand into her bag to grip the handle of her dagger as she walked.

As Fale snuck around the back of Izzy’s building, a man waited for her. His arms were crossed and he pushed off the building with his shoulder. It was toothless, from the night behind Keron’s apartment.

“Knew when I saw that feller wit’ Lisle, you hadda be nearby,” he said.

“Looks like you found me,” Fale said, gripping her dagger.

“You jus’ come wit’ me real ladylike now,” he said, reaching out his hand.

“Don’t bet on it.”

“Oh, I din’t,” he leered, taking a knife out with his other hand.

Fale set the guitar down and walked away from it, pulling out her dagger, she dropped her bag too.

“You din’t have much luck wit’ that one there last time,” he pointed to her blade, laughing.

“Try me again,” she baited him. “I’m not the same girl.”

“Can see it. Wait’ll they hear you’s white headed now. Ya can’t be hidin’ forever.” Panic flashed through Fale’s mind, she couldn’t let him leave knowing what she and Keron both looked like.

*He’s one of “them,”* she thought with a sour taste in her mouth. Anger rose in her like steam in a kettle. She had to protect what she had just won. He had to die. Nelson would want, Nelson would- he would want her to act with honor. She shook herself internally. Takanori warriors didn’t kill if they didn’t have to. She would protect herself and try to get away.

“Better ya git used to losin’. The boss’ll be havin’ a great time breakin’ you. He’s gonna let all o’ us men to take a turn wit ya.” He cackled like an old woman.

“You talk too much,” she said, circling him.

“Do I now?”

“Yeah, I think you’re overcompensating.” She raised one eyebrow at him.

“I should’a taked you down when you come around the corner,” he sneered.

“So, go ahead,” she taunted and he jabbed at her with his knife. Fale jumped back, then readjusted her stance, lightly resting on the balls of her feet. Her elbows were in and her hands

up defensively. He stabbed and swung. She countered, their blades zinging against each other. Little beads of perspiration gathered on his forehead and she knew he was going to get fatigued quickly. Fale stepped into him and blocked his arm across her body, but he switched his knife to the other hand, and swept up catching her bicep. She brought her palm down on his hand and cleared the blade from her arm, swinging her hip into him and thrusting her shoulder into his sternum.

They stepped back from each other breathing heavily, and he lunged again. Fale attacked the man's weapon arm, hitting it down with all her strength, then giving him a roundhouse kick the way Keron taught her. She was proud of herself momentarily and lost focus. The man punched Fale with his free hand in the eye and her head snapped back.

She shook it off and bounced from one foot to the other. "Where is the machine?"

"You askin' me? I ain't seen it." His eyes kept darting over her left shoulder. She started to get nervous as she considered the possibility that more of the Control rats were surrounding her at this very moment.

*Why didn't I check the area?*

"But you know where it is. Someone has to know. Is it in the underground or at the wizard's village? You must have an idea," she said, watching him look over her shoulder again. Was there someone behind her?

"Why ya think I knows so much?" He struck out and their blades clanged together. She was close enough to smell his sour breath.

"I think Gasten was onto Lisle and that's why he said he didn't have the machine," she said fiercely, planting her foot on his thigh and pushing him back.

The man regained his balance and laughed heartily. "Yous kids are always thinkin' you be the center of everthin'. All I knows is, I wouldn' be sent to git ya 'round the clock if'n everybody



knowed where the machine be already.”

She was surprised at his confession. “Why tell me this?”

He grinned with a toothless mouth and pointed over her shoulder. “So, you be payin’ attention to me an’ not him.” She spun to the left, but felt an instant pain, like an ice pick to her temple, and saw blackness.

She woke up with a pain in her stomach. Everything was fuzzy. There were two male voices arguing. Fale tried not to move, she wanted to have the advantage. Her stomach was pressing against a bony shoulder and she hung down the back of one of the men, probably the one who was waiting for her, she assumed by the familiar stench. They were fighting over where the portal was located. Her eyes shot wide open, she couldn’t allow them to take her through a portal. They could be taking her anywhere, Garrith included. As the man shifted to adjust her weight, she made her move. Pulling her foot back with lightning speed, she kicked him as hard as she could wherever her foot would connect. By the way they fell, she could tell she kicked him in a good place. He roared as she rolled and tripped over her feet trying to stand. She pushed against the cement with her fingers and ran. She wasn’t sure where she was, so she simply ran away from the direction they were facing.

The men gave chase, the smaller man leading and the larger one limping. They were too close. As soon as she recognized her surroundings, she found an apartment building to hide in. She ducked behind a set of stairs in between the wall and a food machine. She heard their feet slapping the concrete, running past her, shouting to each other to split up. When she couldn’t hear them any more, she quickly checked to see if they were out of sight, and ran as fast as she could back to Izzy’s apartment. Her bag and the guitar lay outside and she bent to grab them before running back to the house. She had her hands on the handles when she heard him.

“We back to where we started, huh? If’n ya give up, I might go easy, but I ain’t goin’ back wit’ empty hands this time,” he spat.

She spun around and backed away from her things. "I'm afraid you have to, because there is no way in hell I'm going with you."

Her hands were outstretched and he lunged for them. She punched him in the face, backing up again.

He laughed. "That all you's got?"

"I'm a little busy," she breathed. Her head throbbed. She knew she was losing blood, her hair was warm and sticking to her face. She needed to end this.

She felt her pockets.

"You lookin' fer this?" He pulled her dagger from his jacket pocket and wheezed a laugh at her.

*Oh stars.* She would have to let him get close to her to take it back.

"I can sees ya thinkin' an' it ain't gonna do no good," he taunted.

"You don't really want that dagger, it's deadly for you," she warned.

"I ain't afraid of yous." He narrowed his eyes and switched the dagger to his other hand, taking out another knife and pointing them both at Fale.

She tried to think, her vision was getting spotty. The other man ran around the side of the building, and when the first man turned to look, she stepped forward and raised her back knee, snapping her leg forward and rapidly kicking him in the face. She recentered her weight and gripped his wrist, wrenching the dagger toward his palm and breaking his grip. He recovered quickly and thrust his other blade into her shoulder; she pushed against him and they both took a step backward, but she had her dagger back.

"Gettin' tired?" He grinned at her.

*Where did the other guy go?*

The man before her stayed where he was, but his quick glance over Fale's shoulder told her all she needed to know. She ducked as she turned, and dodged the henchman who had meant to grab her around the neck. She turned herself invisible and moved from between the men. He had been right behind her. She had almost gotten caught.

She sucked in a lungful of air and darted behind the second man. He was much smaller and she had no problem putting him in a chokehold. Unfortunately, it gave away her location to the first man and he attacked. She kicked him in the knee cap as she spun around, keeping the man she was holding between them. She heard the one in her arms gasping. Knowing he would be turning purple by this point, she told herself she only had to hold on for a few more seconds. Spots were appearing in her vision.

A sharp, intense pain exploded in her hip and she looked down to see a black handle sticking out of her body. The man in her arms had managed to reach back and stab her. It was a desperate move for freedom, and she relaxed her grip some, but he quickly succumbed to the loss of air and fell limp to the ground. Fale couldn't keep up her invisibility; she had lost control of her concentration. She dropped the man and stepped back, pulling the blade from her flesh. The odds raised in Fale's favor; two hands, two knives. She circled her hands around in figure eights and pointed the blades at the first man.

"Just us again," she said confidently.

They ran toward each other and weapons clashed with fury. She crossed her blades, forcing his knife back toward his chest. Their arms were shaking with tension. He took a quick step back and Fale pushed forward, but her arms were too short to force his knife. As she put her leg forward, he punched her in the nose, blood spraying everywhere. Her neck arched and her eyes closed briefly.

She struck out with her dagger in a blind arc and sliced his forearm, but he pulled her close to him; pinning her arm. The man grabbed a fistful of Fale's hair and pulled her head back,

exposing her neck, and placed the tip of his blade to her artery.

“There now sweetheart. Don’cha move.” Fale felt the blade nick her throat as the man’s foul breath blew into her face. “You an’ the key be comin’ wit’ me, if I gotta knock ya out an’ carry ya all over agin.”

“By yourself?” she said doubtfully. “Are you going to leave your man here, passed out in the grass?”

“I got ways,” he grinned. “I work for wizards. I cheat.”

“I’ve got my own ways.” Fale reached up with her free hand and touched the knife at her throat. It disintegrated and flakes of ash floated to the ground. She spun in his grip, putting her knife to his heart.

The man’s eyes grew. Suddenly, he appeared to be choking. He looked at his arm where Fale had cut him and said, “It be burnin’ like hot coals. What you done to me? What kinda blade you got there?”

“I warned you. It’s enchanted,” she said as he let go of her and backed away. He looked like he was going to run, but he stumbled and fell. Fale went to him, sadness in her eyes. She knew he would die, but she didn’t know it would be like this.

“Stay away from me,” he said, holding a palm toward her.

“I’m sorry,” Fale had never been the cause of anyone’s death before. She was petrified. Her eyes widened as she watched the man crawl backwards.

He lay down and his hand fell next to him. Fale watched him struggle to breathe and suddenly go limp. His skin sucked to his bones and wrinkled like a dehydrated fruit. He changed colors, first purple, then gray, then he seemed to sink in on himself as he too, turned to ash. For a second, she thought of her mother and the unforgivable way she died, and Fale felt like a score had been settled. *That’s for my mother.* But she knew there was no validation in killing, and she

shoved the foreign thought away.

Knowing he was gone, she looked around her for witnesses. Seeing no one, she ran to get her bag and picked up the guitar, then quickened her pace to the marsh. She wondered what would happen if another of Gasten's men showed up. Could she kill again? Would it be as easy when she knew she wanted his life? Would she go swiftly for his heart- or would she hesitate? What would Lisle and Izzy think when they found out she had killed a man? What if she lost the next fight? None of it would matter if she didn't live to tell about it. Keron was sure to come to that conclusion if she didn't hurry. She had to get back before the guys.

## CHAPTER 17

The sky grew darker as the clouds rolled in like a funeral dirge. Fale had barely enough time to get back and light the lanterns before Keron and Lisle came through the door. She looked up guiltily at Keron, but didn't have a chance to explain.

"What happened to you?" he demanded, crossing the room to her.

"Remember the man from behind your building?"

"Yeah, what about him?"

"He was waiting for me behind Izzy's."

Keron sucked in a breath and reached out to touch her bloody temple, then her swollen eye.

"Did you use the dagger?" Lisle asked.

"Yes, I didn't want to." Fale hung her head.

Keron held her by the shoulders, "Are you injured anywhere else?" Keron didn't flinch at the news that she had just killed a man. Instead, his eyes fluttered over every inch of her, searching for wounds.

"Not really." She glanced to the left.

He looked down. "Fale, you're bleeding everywhere."

"It's okay," she said, pulling away.

"Can you heal yourself?" Lisle asked.

"Apparently not," she replied. "I can still only heal others."

"Let me see," Keron said.

Fale raised her sleeve to show the men her bicep, then pulled her shirt away from her opposite shoulder and looked up. “No big deal.”

“It looks awful, Fale,” Lisle said.

“Have you even looked at your hip?” Keron asked.

“I tried not to,” she looked down briefly. She would definitely need stitches; she had been afraid of that. Fale’s shoulder still oozed blood, like her hip, and her forearm ran with tiny rivers of blood to her fingertips. She held the skin of her bicep together.

“We have gauze...”

“Fale,” Keron reprimanded.

“Get Lisle settled, then you can stitch me up,” she said.

“Easy enough. Lisle, there’s the couch.” Keron pointed to the couch next to them. “You sleep there. Now let’s take care of those injuries.”

Fale rolled her eyes. “The kitchen is in there. And our bedroom is in there.” Fale pointed to each room. “Our medical supplies are in the bathroom over there.”

“Wait. There’s only one bedroom here?” Lisle asked.

“Yes,” Fale said. “I’m sorry to have to put you on the couch.”

“So, all this time you’ve been sharing...” Lisle’s mouth dropped open as he pointed between her and Keron. Fale caught on and blushed wildly.

“Yep.” Keron looked like a strutting peacock.

“Oh,” Lisle replied, deflated.

Fale felt like someone had stepped on her heart. She hated hurting Lisle, he was her best friend. “Come on, Keron. Get this over with,” her voice was venomous.

She stood while Keron sat on the toilet and pulled the thread through her flesh tightly.

“Ouch,” she complained.

“I can’t believe I left you alone again and this happened,” he said, blaming himself. Keron cut the string and wet a washcloth. “Some wardsman I’m turning out to be. I’m responsible for this.”

“It’s fine, Keron. It was no big deal. I didn’t mind fighting him. Really.”

Keron wiped her arm, turning it over to get all the blood off. “Lift your head.” She did, and he cleaned the blood from her neck and shoulder. “This was a narrow call, Fale.”

“He only wanted to take me in,” she countered.

“Well, you won’t be going anywhere on your own again.”

“Unless I have to,” she said.

“No, Fale.” She could tell he wouldn’t give her up again. They’d just become closer.

“I can do it, Keron,” Fale’s voice rose with her passionate plea.

“Do you have a death wish?” he demanded, narrowing his eyes at her.

“No, I have a wish to be independent.” She held her head high.

*Where did that come from?*

“You’re not invincible Fale. Who do you want to be independent from?”

“From everyone.” Her voice was small. “It’s the only way I feel free. Surely you can understand the desire to be free.”

He threw the rag down. “I can’t protect you if you don’t let me, Fale.” He ran his hands through his hair. Streaking her blood across his forehead.

“Keron.” She wiped the blood off with her thumb.

“Taking care of you is getting confusing.”



“But you’re my guard, you can’t go anywhere. You promised,” Fale said nervously.

“I know, but how am I supposed to guard you and set you free at the same time? I want to hold you so tight and protect you from everything. You’re like a butterfly and I don’t know how to hold you without crushing your wings,” he said quietly, cupping his hands.

She took them in hers. “We’ll figure it out. We make magic together.”

“We have to be discreet about it.” He smiled sadly. “We have Lisle now.”

“Oh, that’s right.” Fale looked into Keron’s eyes. “As long as you still want to keep me, we’ll be all right.”

“I’ve always wanted you. Even when I said I didn’t,” he said, pulling her into his kiss. Fale melted into his arms.

Lisle was sitting on the couch when they emerged from the bathroom. “I was going to get you some ice for your shiner, but you don’t have any,” Lisle said. Fale was confused. “You don’t have much of anything in there,” he said.

Keron touched Fale’s eye and she winced, “You are gonna have a black eye,” he said and she understood.

“We meant to buy food today,” Fale said, shaking her head. “I guess I’ll have to go out for some groceries really quick.”

“Were you not just in the bathroom with me?” Keron asked her incredulously. “You’re not going anywhere all cut up. I’ll be back in a while.”

“But-” Fale began.

“No. Arguing.” Keron held up his finger.

“He is bossy,” Lisle said when Keron was gone. “You can take care of yourself.”

“It’s okay, Lisle,” Fale said. “He is watching out for me.”

“I watch out for you, too. But I don’t tell you what to do.”

“Can we drop it?” she asked.

“Sure. What do you want to do?”

“Do you play cards, Lisle?”

“Some,” he said.

“Good. I’ll teach you what you don’t know.”

Lisle sat on the couch while Fale changed clothes. She knelt on the floor on the other side of the coffee table and they played hand after hand of cards while it began to thunder outside.

“I hope Keron doesn’t get caught in the rain,” Fale said.

“He’d better hurry,” Lisle said. “It looks like it’s going to pour.”

“He should be back soon.” She looked at her watch.

Lisle laid his cards carefully on the table in a row, but when he looked up, Fale was lying on the floor. Her cards were everywhere and her eyes were open and glazed.

“Fale,” Lisle leapt up and over the table. He leaned over her and put his fingers to the artery in her neck. Her heart was pumping, so he knelt over her to put his ear to her mouth but heard nothing. He breathed into her mouth then returned his ear to her lips and heard... a door slamming. Lisle placed his lips on her open mouth and blew. Turning his cheek to her mouth, he listened harder, and he felt her breath just as he was lifted bodily off the ground.

“What are you doing?” Keron snapped.

“She slumped over,” Lisle shouted. “I was checking to make sure she was alive, idiot.”

“Fale? Sprout?” Keron knelt down and picked up her limp body. “Wake up.”

“Yeah, that’s working,” Lisle said.

“Shut up, Lisle.” Keron’s voice was low and grating. “You kissing her sure isn’t going to wake her up.”

“I was breathing into her- never mind.” Lisle stopped explaining. “Does she do this a lot?”

“No,” Keron said. “Sometimes goes blank when she’s having a vision, though.”

“She’ll come out of it, then.”

“I know she will, wizard. I just hate it when she does this.” Keron said ‘wizard’ like it was a bad word.

“It’s part of who she is, barbarian.” Lisle’s animosity toward Keron surprised even himself. He felt like Keron wasn’t accepting Fale with all her magic, the way he did.

“Make yourself useful, bookworm, and go put the groceries away.” Keron brushed stray locks of Fale’s hair off her shoulders.

Fale’s eyelids fluttered and she looked up to see Keron’s concerned expression. “What’s the matter?” she pressed on the worry lines in his brow with her thumb, smoothing them away.

“You phased out, sweetheart. What happened?”

“I had a vision,” she said slowly, recalling every detail. “Get Lisle.”

“Lisle,” Keron called, as he helped Fale sit up on the couch.

Lisle came from the kitchen, “Is she awake?”

“I’ve seen the machine,” Fale said. “Part of it, anyway. It’s big. I only saw silver scales. They were as big as my hand.”

“Did you see where it is?” Lisle asked.

“It isn’t in Alloy City. I know that. It lies in a cavern by a great crystalline lake. There is a buffalo shaped mountain in the distance, but I’m not sure where it is. A wicked tree looking like a woman stands on the hilltop. There is a stone nearby with the same symbol on our house carved into it, at the mouth of the cave, as tall as I am.”

“You ever heard of such a place, Lisle?” Keron asked.

“No. It must be in the mountains, though. That would make sense, to hide the machine to the north of us,” Lisle said.

“The mages live in the mountains. They should know, or be able to help us find it,” Fale said.

“How do you call the mages?” Lisle asked.

“I just have to need them really badly,” Fale said. “Their sage has probably already told Lucien we need to see him.”

“I doubt he will travel in this rain,” Keron said. “Let’s eat and if he doesn’t come tonight, he’ll be here tomorrow.”

There weren’t enough chairs in the kitchen, so Fale drug a porch chair inside. The three of them ate tacos and cleaned up in the small kitchen, speculating on the location of the machine from what they’d heard of other locations in Algea.

After dinner Lisle asked, “What do you guys usually do now?”

“Go to bed,” Keron said.

Lisle looked uncomfortable. “We talk,” Fale said quickly. “Unless you want to shower. We can take turns. Keron, won’t you play your guitar?”

“I don’t play for wizards,” he said, but seeing her disappointment he added, “I’ll tune it up

though, and see if I can think of anything.” She beamed at him, glad he changed his mind for her sake.

Lisle said, “I think I’m going to wash up.” He picked through his bag and grabbed some clothes, then marched into the bathroom and shut the door.

Fale waited until she heard the water running and said, “I think we make him uncomfortable.”

“Yep.” Keron had his guitar on his lap in the living room and was tuning one string to another.

“Keron,” she admonished. “We should make him feel at home.”

“It’s only gonna happen if I leave, and I’m not leaving,” he said.

“I’m sure it’s not like that. Maybe I should sleep out here on the floor.”

“The hell you should. I saw him on top of you earlier and just about lost my mind,” he said.

“What?”

“When you had your vision. Lisle thought you were dead.”

“Poor Lisle,” she said.

“Yeah, poor Lisle, on top of you with his mouth on yours when I walked in.”

“What did you do?” Fale accused.

“Nothing, Fale. I sent him to unpack groceries.”

“Oh, Keron. He can’t help how he feels.”

“How does he feel, Fale? Has he told you?” Fale looked at her hands. She didn’t want to betray Lisle’s confidence. “Has he, Fale?”

She couldn't lie to Keron, either. "Yes," she said.

"Does he like you as more than a friend?"

"Yes," she said again.

"Does he love you?" he asked vehemently. Anger rolled off him in waves.

"What difference does it make?"

"To me? Or to you? You should know why it makes a difference to me. I'm a fighter, I need to know my opponent, but if you're asking about yourself? Maybe we have a problem."

Fale sighed heavily. "Yes, he loves me. And I love—"

"Oh good, I'm just in time," Lisle said snidely from the bathroom door in a pair of shorts and a body hugging t-shirt. "Don't stop on my account." He strode between them and flopped on the couch.

"Aah! Men." Fale threw up her hands and charged out of the living room into the bedroom, slamming the door.

"Was it something I said?" Lisle snickered.

"Shut up, Lisle," Keron said, picking up his instrument and following Fale into their room.

"I don't want to talk anymore," Fale said, changing into her pajamas. She was angry with both of them and wanted to go to bed.

"I'm sorry," Keron said. "It's my nature to doubt. Especially why *you* would be with *me*. I'm a jerk."

"I know," she said, trying not to soften.

"Whatever you do, don't smile," He teased her, reaching out to touch her face. She smiled sadly. "That is pitiful," he said.

“Sorry. But you know I can’t be held responsible for how Lisle feels.”

“I know.”

“Will you stop bickering with him?” she asked.

“I’ll try harder.”

“Good. Will you play for me now?”

Keron laughed. “Yeah, I’ll play for you.” He sat on the bed and played a beautiful melody, his fingers flying over the fretboard.

“I love it,” she said.

“I thought you might.”

“Play another? Please?” Fale got into the bed to listen while lantern light threw deep shadows across Keron’s jaw. He played songs for her, then when he began to falter, he leaned the guitar in its case.

Keron changed in the shifting light and slid into bed. “Come here?” He held his arm out to her.

“But Lisle...”

“I just wanna hold you.”

She smiled and rolled into his neck. “Mmm.” She got comfortable. “Oh Keron, go take Lisle a pillow and one of our quilts, before we fall asleep.” She poked him in the side.

“Ah, really?” Keron complained. “Do I have to?”

“Yes.” She pushed him, laughing.

He rose and carried the pillow and blanket to the living room. She heard Lisle’s biting tone, but Keron simply said, “Good night, Lisle.”

“Good job,” Fale said when he returned and snuggled her into his shoulder, “I’m proud of you.”

“Come here and kiss me,” he said.

“Gladly,” she grinned.

Fale woke early on purpose to make breakfast. Oatmeal, scrambled eggs from a carton, toast and dried bacon all smelled heavenly from the kitchen. Lisle woke up first, but went into the bathroom. Keron came up behind Fale, wrapping his arms around her, and kissing her neck. “Good morning, love.”

“Good morning.” She smiled. “Sit down. It’s almost done.” Lisle walked into the kitchen like a zombie, his hair everywhere.

“Man, how am I supposed to eat with you sitting there like that?” Lisle said to Keron.

“Like what?” Fale asked.

“Shirtless,” Lisle said sourly.

Keron looked unsure of himself. He was self-conscious of his mechanical parts already so Fale said, “I think his bichanic arm is sexy.”

“Oh, I bet you do,” Lisle said bitterly. “It’s not that, it’s all the muscles he has everywhere.”

Keron’s laugh boomed. “Jealous, Lisle?”

“Hardly,” Lisle flexed his chest.

Fale turned back to the stove. *Let them duke it out.* She had no desire to have testosterone for breakfast. She served the men their food and sat down. “I wonder what time Lucien is going to get here?” She said around a mouthful of toast and jam.



“No idea. Will you pour me some coffee?” Keron asked.

“Sure,” she got up again. “I wonder if he’ll come alone or not?”

“How do you know he’ll come at all?” Lisle asked.

“Because I need him,” Fale said with complete faith. “And he said he would.”

They all ate and helped with the dishes, then split up to get changed. Keron and Fale took turns in the shower and they all met back in the small living room. “I can help you make up your bed, Lisle,” Fale offered.

“Thank you. I was wondering, do you want me to contact Taran while I’m with Keron, so they can meet?”

“I don’t know, Lisle. It seems so weird. Keron might freak out.”

“I won’t freak out,” Keron said.

“We have time, it’s only afternoon there,” Lisle said. “Garrith seems to be in another time and season in their dimension.”

“Can I leave you three boys alone together?” Fale asked, narrowing her eyes at them.

“Absolutely,” Keron said.

Fale looked at Lisle. “Cross my heart,” he said.

“Fine,” she sat back and closed her eyes. Her white hair was loose and parted in the middle, making her cheeks look pinker than usual. She folded her hands in her lap as Lisle began to speak in the Crion language he used for spells. Keron watched with rapt attention as Fale appeared to relax back into the couch.

Keron saw her suddenly sit straight up and open her eyes. She carried herself differently than usual; one shoulder was higher than the other and her elbows rested on her knees, which she

let bow out. "Lisle, good to see ya."

"Hey Taran," Lisle said. "How are you?"

"Can't complain, I was shovelin' so she's not gonna be mighty happy ta be takin' my place today." Lisle laughed, but Keron was dumbfounded. "See we got company?"

"Oh, yes." Lisle introduced them, "Taran, this is Keron. He's Fale's boyfriend."

"Oh. I thought...never mind. Nice ta meet ya, Keron." Fale reached over to shake Keron's hand. "Name's Taran. I live in Garrith."

"Nice to meet you." Keron shook Fale's firm grip.

"So, have you had any luck with finding the man we asked about? Nelson?" Lisle asked.

"Nah. Minova an' I haven't seen any new men about, but we're keepin' an eye out. My mates an' I still plan ta take a peek in the castle, though. Not tellin' Minova, o'course."

"Be careful. Fale told us about how cruel those guards are," Lisle said.

"I felt bad she was feelin' all that."

"Feeling what?" Keron asked.

"When they are in each other's bodies, they feel what the other one is feeling. Fale showed up after Taran got ten lashes," Lisle explained.

Taran winced. Keron was not sure about this anymore. "And what did you say you were doing?"

"It's work time. I been shoveling sheep shite since I got my lashes."

"So that's what Fale's doing right now while we're talking?" Keron asked.

"Yeah," Taran said. "It's terrible hot and mostly just smelly hard work. The guards're what make it difficult. Always yellin' and crackin' their whips."

“Get her back, Lisle. Now,” Keron said.

“She always comes back on her own,” he said.

“She finds my sister, but she won’t be doin’ that durin’ work time,” Taran said. “You better figure out a way, or I’ll be here ‘til supper.”

“It’s *her* gift, though, not mine,” Lisle said.

“What about the spell?” Keron asked. “The one Gasten uses to get there?”

“The Aperio?” Lisle thought.

“Yeah. Can you do it backwards?” Keron asked.

“I could try one using reditus. It means to come back,” Lisle said. He pulled out a book from his bag and flipped the pages until he found what he was looking for. “It was good to see you Taran. We’re looking for the machine. Fale had a vision of it.”

Taran’s expression brightened. “Great news. I’ll tell Minova an’ we’ll keep lookin’ for Nelson. Promise. Nice ta meet ya, Keron.”

“You too,” Keron said, tipping his head anxiously.

Lisle began to chant his spell and Fale’s head lowered, eyes closing. Lisle kept speaking and they waited. Fale threw her arms up over her head and screamed in pain. Keron jumped up and sat by her, putting his arms around her. “You’re okay now, Sprout. You’re home. You’re home.”

She glared at Lisle. “Do you know what Taran does in the afternoon?” She spat. “Did he tell you?”

“Yes. I’m sorry. Perhaps we should stick with evening visits,” Lisle repented.

“You think?” Fale crossed her arms and glared at him. She shrugged out of Keron’s embrace and paced the floor. “Has he seen Nelson?”

“No,” Lisle said. “But he’s happy about the vision.”

“You told him about the vision? Be careful what you share with him, Lisle. I don’t want them to have false hope,” Fale said. “What if I don’t find it?”

“We will,” Keron said. “Lucien will help.”

A light rapping at the door a little while later made Fale jump. She stopped her pacing and ran to the door. “Lucien. Come in, please,” she said, opening the door. She ushered him in. “This is our friend, Lisle.”

“One of the good wizards,” Keron added.

Lisle stood. “Nice to meet you, sir.” They shook hands.

Lucien took a seat in one of the arm chairs next to Lisle, so Fale sat next to Keron. “I had a vision of the machine, but you know that,” Fale said and Lucien smiled.

“What did this place look like?” Lucien asked.

Fale described her vision in detail making sure to include her theories about the mountains.

“It’s not in the mountains of Algea, where we live. I will have to take this information to my sage, but if I’m right, you’ve described an island not on the map,” Lucien said.

“When can you tell us about this place?” Keron asked.

Lucien looked thoughtful. “Tonight,” he said, getting up. “I will return.”

“Thank you,” Fale called, seeing him out.

“Should we get Izzy?” Lisle asked. “If Lucien is coming back with news tonight on where the machine is, she should be here.”

“I guess,” Keron said. “Is everybody sure Izzy should come?”

“This is my mission, but Lisle and I think we can convince Izzy we are the good guys if we take her with us. And you’re the wardsman, so I guess we need everyone. Who’s going to get Izzy?” Fale asked. “I can do it.”

“Not alone,” Keron added, “please.”

“Lisle has people out looking for him, but he has no disguise. Will you go with me?” Fale asked Keron.

“Of course,” he said.

“I’ll read,” Lisle said. “No big deal. There’s food for lunch, I’ll be fine.”

“Let’s get going, we don’t have much time,” Fale said.

She had a feeling time was not the only thing she would be in desperate need of today.

## CHAPTER 18

Keron held Fale's hand through the marsh. "It's nice to be alone again." He said, pulling her into his embrace and kissing her.

"I'm sinking," she laughed, gripping his shoulders as the mud swallowed her shoes.

"Can't catch a break," he lamented.

"You poor thing," she said with mock pity.

"I want to have you to myself."

"Maybe when this is all over, we can hide away from everyone," she laid her hands on his chest.

"Sounds perfect," he said. "If Nelson lets me live."

Fale laughed at him. "He can't really stop us, Mr. Palmquist."

"That's right, my wife." He kissed her again.

"We'd better get Izzy," she urged.

"Yeah, or I'll keep you in the marsh forever."

"Ick."

"Me or the marsh?" He feigned insult with his hand on his heart.

"The marsh, dummy." She pecked his lips one last time and pulled his hand toward the city.

Izzy looked shocked when she answered the door. "I'm not supposed to meet you guys

until tomorrow.”

“About that,” Fale said, stepping into the apartment with Keron. “We came to get you.”

“What? Why?” Izzy asked.

“Fale had a vision of the machine and it’s not in Alloy City. Are you ready to go on a road trip?” Keron replied.

Izzy laughed nervously. “Yeah, about that…”

“What is it, Iz?” Fale knew Izzy’s expressions well and this one said there was a problem.

“It’s just, this has been lots of fun and all, like a mystery novel, but you guys know my parents work for Control. If I go with you, I am going against them. I mean, you’re my family, too. Fale don’t look at me like that, you know what a spineless person I can be.”

Fale was saddened. “I understand, Izzy, I really do. I don’t know what I would do in your situation. If I had my father back, I’m sure I would be torn.”

“I’m sorry.” Izzy looked remorseful.

“Don’t tell your parents about us,” Keron said quietly, but it sounded like a threat.

“I won’t. I promise,” she said.

“We should go,” Keron moved toward the door.

“Izzy-” Fale began, but she sighed. “Be careful.” She walked to the door and opened it, waiting for Keron to pass.

“Wait,” Izzy called. Fale turned around to see Izzy with her hand out and her eyes squeezed shut.

“Yes?”

“I guess if I’m going, I don’t have much choice about when we leave. And I’m going, I want to help you guys get Nelson back. He gave me a chance to be myself, but better. This had

better work, because my parents are going to kill me if they ever see me again. This is the point of no return.”

Fale smiled and shut the door. “Of course, they’ll see you again, but we’ll be heroes when we rescue my people. They will have to understand.”

“No, I’m pretty sure they won’t understand.” Izzy looked sad.

“You’re always welcome to be with us,” Keron offered.

“Thanks guys. So where is the machine?” Izzy walked to her closet and took out a large duffel bag.

“It might be on an island,” Fale said.

“I’ll need to pack, then stop by my parents’ to get credits.”

“We can’t-” Keron began.

“We can wait for you,” Fale interrupted. She was excited to have all her friends together and safe.

“But hurry,” Keron said, wanting to get home as soon as possible. “Lucien is coming to the house this evening. He’s the mage who is giving us information.”

“I will,” Izzy promised.

Fale helped Izzy pack the large duffel and a small one. Then she picked up her shoulder bag and wore it cross-bodied like Fale. “I’m ready,” she said.

They walked to Izzy’s parent’s apartment where Fale and Keron waited outside with Izzy’s bags. “I’ll only be a minute. I won’t tell them the plan, but I want to say goodbye,” Izzy said, and hurried inside. Fale knew Izzy would never leave if she truly thought her parents wouldn’t forgive her. But she didn’t know if Izzy fully understood the weight of their mission.

“This makes me nervous.” Keron looked around them.



“I know,” Fale answered. “She won’t say anything. Her father gives her extra credits out of a separate account so her mother won’t know. They both spoil her.”

“I know. She’s always been a lucky girl,” Keron said.

“She doesn’t have any idea how fortunate she is,” Fale said. “They give her anything she wants. I just want parents.”

Keron put an understanding arm around her shoulders. “I meant, being out here in the open makes me nervous. We’re like punching bags in a gym.”

“Huh?”

“We’re targets,” Keron amended.

“Oh,” Fale exhaled. She looked around and saw an old arboretum house in brass. It was one of the city’s old projects to make the city green. The building was ten feet tall, fourteen feet long, and barely wide enough for a person to walk through two rows of plants. The metal had long turned green and the glass shards pointed skyward as if accusing the very sun for shriveling the mass of brown, crispy plant matter left behind. Fale grabbed Keron’s hand and pulled. “Come on,” she said, walking toward the back. Hardy green vines wound their way around the structure and hung down to conceal them.

Their eyes turned to moons as they heard the crunching of gravel under boots. “It’s Control,” Keron whispered. “Hurry.” They dashed behind the arboretum, staying low, behind the planter cases.

The men who traveled the sidewalk, however, were not Control. One was nothing but a dirty thug, any one they may have met these past days; but the other man, the other man exuded power. His clothes could not be seen, because he was covered in a floor-length cape, as black as the midnight sky. He walked with grace and almost floated over the ground until he was even with the dead greenhouse, then he stopped and straightened. His head raised and Fale prayed the

hood would not turn in her direction as she peered through a crack in between the pipes. He sensed her, it was clear. Gasten. He knew she was near, at least he knew she had been here. Fale shook. What did he want with her? Why did he hate her? What would he do with her if he succeeded in capturing her? Her heartbeat increased, oh stars, could he hear her?

“Where else have you looked?” Gasten asked the man next to him. His voice had a magnetic pull. Deep and dark and promising evil beyond her imagination.

“We done tore apart da underground. Nobody seen her. They swears on it. Sir.”

“That’s not good enough,” he roared and Fale felt the tiny hairs on her arms stand up.

“They go to the plant sayin’ it, too.” The man spoke so softly Fale had to strain to listen.

“Maybe we should send a token to the mages. I bet they’ll know where to find her.” Gasten’s voice was loud and clear now, and his tone skimmed over Fale’s nerves like a cheese grater over a chef’s knuckles.

“What token we be sendin, sir?”

“I’m thinking one of Nelson’s fingers...”

Fale didn’t notice what he said next. She only saw him getting farther and farther away from her grasping hands. “Let. Go. Of. Me, Keron. I am going to kill him.” Keron’s arms crossed her body and held her tightly to him while she struggled to go after Gasten and his minion. When Gasten was out of sight, and she stopped violently shaking her head, he removed his hand from her mouth. “Didn’t you hear them? They are going to hurt Nelson! I can’t let him do it. Not for me, not for me, not... for... me...” She slowly gave up fighting him.

“You coming to your senses yet?” Keron asked. “You know they already have him, right? We can’t stop that. But we can try to rescue them all.”

Fale inhaled and closed her eyes. “You’re right.” She sagged in his arms.

“I’m sorry, Sprout.”

Izzy was back ten minutes later. Keron had begun to nervously pace the path behind the arboretum. He took her bags and they left for the edge of the city. "How did it go?" Fale asked politely, but her voice was strained.

"Great. I said I was going on a spring vacation and I need extra credits for a little trip. Daddy was the only one there. He asked where we were going and I said a bunch of us were going to a little island."

"And it worked?" Keron asked incredulously.

Fale looked at him meaningfully. "Izzy's daddy trusts her."

"A little too much," Keron said.

"I'm right here," Izzy spoke up.

"How much did you get?" Keron asked.

"Several thousand more," Izzy said flippantly. Keron and Fale looked at each other and smiled.

They led Izzy through the miles of concrete and marsh to the little coterie house they had come to call home. "Why can't I see it?" Izzy asked when they stood before the safe house.

"It's enchanted," Keron said, taking Izzy's other arm and helping lead her inside.

"It's so cute," Izzy cooed in the entryway.

"You won't think so tonight," Fale said. "There's nowhere left to sleep."

"I'll sleep with you, Fale," Izzy put her arm through Fale's and linked elbows.

Keron coughed. "Um, Izzy."

"Hmm?"

"Never mind. You'll figure things out." He grinned as they stepped from the entryway.

“Figure what out?” Izzy asked.

“Sleeping arrangements,” he said, standing aside for the girls to pass and grinning at Fale.

Fale slapped his chest and whispered, “You might be sleeping on the floor. Bring in the other deck chair for the kitchen.”

“Hey Lisle,” Izzy called.

“What’s going on, Iz?” he answered.

“Not much, I guess we’re going on a trip.”

“Looks like it.”

Izzy joined Lisle in the living room to talk, and Keron disappeared into the bedroom. Fale flipped the light on in the kitchen. “I’m going to see what’s for dinner,” she called out.

Fale looked in the fridge, there was still crumbled meat and veggies for salad. They also had some cheese substitutes. She decided to make a lasagna, so she found a pan and began to layer. Fale could hear Keron’s guitar coming from the bedroom and she put the pan in the preheated oven. She was about to start on a salad when Izzy stepped into the kitchen.

“You didn’t tell me there was one bedroom,” she whispered.

“You never asked,” Fale said nonchalantly, getting out a big bowl from the cabinet.

“Fale, please tell me he slept on the couch.”

“Okay,” Fale smiled.

“Okay what?”

“He slept on the couch,” Fale said.

“He did?”

“No.”

“*Fale*,” Izzy declared. “The whole time?”

“Yep.” Fale took out spinach and lettuce and put them in the bowl.

Izzy sighed. “Fale, did he...have you two...?”

Fale stopped and showed her ring to Izzy, “What do you think, Iz?”

“He asked you to marry him?” Izzy squealed.

“Yes,” Fale laughed.

Izzy slapped her arm. “And you didn’t tell me?”

“No, I didn’t tell *Lisle*,” Fale amended.

“Oooh. You finally figured it out, huh?” Izzy asked. “Oh, my bright stars. And he stayed here last night. How did that go?”

“It was rough,” Fale said. “I thought they were going to kill each other a few times.”

“I’m sorry, Fale. Do you want me to say something to Lisle?”

“No. The one I’m having issues with right now is Keron. I want to be more independent in my life, and he wants to protect me from everything,” Fale said.

“I think it’s sweet. I would love to have a hero like that,” Izzy said dreamily.

“But I am supposed to BE the hero, Iz,” said Fale. The freedom of an entire generation of people in Garrith rested on her shoulders alone. She couldn’t help feeling like Taran and Lucien and the mages expected her to be their redeemer.

“Everyone needs help sometimes, Fale.”

“I guess. That’s why you guys are coming with me.” Fale chopped cucumber.

“Oh gee, thanks. It’s nice to feel needed,” Izzy pouted.

“You know what I mean Izzy. Don’t pout.” Fale added tomatoes to the bowl.

“I might understand you, but give the guys a break. They aren’t mind readers. Poor Lisle is pining for you already.”

“I am being as nice to him as I can be, without setting off Keron. Pass me the rest of the cheese for this salad.” Fale tossed the salad with some croutons made from her crusty bread. Then she put water on to boil for tea. She had time to mix up a box of brownies. They would eat well tonight, because who knew when they would eat this well again?

Izzy placed plates on the table and the girls talked about the weather and the effect it was having on their hair; anything superficial they could think of. When the lasagna was ready, Fale put the brownies in and called the guys. “Dinner’s ready. Go wash your hands.”

Keron emerged from the bedroom and washed in the kitchen while Lisle was in the bathroom. “Smells great, Sprout.” He stepped behind Fale and kissed her cheek. “What’s the occasion?”

“We’re going on an adventure,” Fale said.

Lisle walked into the kitchen. “Ugh. Get a room.”

“Got one,” Keron said, hugging Fale.

She swatted him off and cut the lasagna into squares, piling a piece onto each plate. “Sit down you two, and eat.”

Everyone sat and Izzy passed the salad bowl around. They all ate heartily. “If we have to go to an island, won’t we need a boat?” Fale asked.

“How are we gonna afford a boat with the couple thousand credits we have together?” Keron asked.

“How are we going to get to the coast?” asked Lisle.

“We’ll have to go north, through the marsh and trees, to the base of the mountains and follow them around to the coast.” Izzy said. “Maybe we can buy horses?”

“How much will it cost?” asked Keron.

“And how long would it take?” Lisle questioned.

“It would take several days to get to the coast. Four or five, probably.” Izzy said.

“Well, we can pool our money,” Fale said. “Keron and I seem to have unlimited funds.”

Lisle looked incredulous. “Really? The mages are funding you for everything?” Fale nodded.

“She is the queen. Maybe the money was hers anyway,” Keron added.

“What are we going to do about the machine?” Lisle asked Fale.

“What about it?”

“How are we going to find it?”

“We don’t know this other island, but we know it’s hidden. Maybe the people there know where it is?” Keron suggested. “Maybe the mages know more than they have told us so far.”

“We don’t even know what we’re looking for.” Izzy scraped her plate to get the last bite.

“We know it’s big, but it can’t be too big, or it wouldn’t be easy to hide. It may be box-like, and we know it has a keyhole for Fale’s key,” Keron reasoned.

“We’ll ask all the questions we can, then find the cave I saw in my vision next to the rock with the symbol. I’m sure it’s in there. My vision was dark,” Fale looked around the table at her team. “When we find it, I’ll turn it on with the key and we’ll see what it does.”

“What if it’s dangerous?” Keron asked.

“I don’t think it is,” Fale raised her eyebrows and shrugged.

“How is a machine going to bring home a large group of people from another dimension?” Izzy asked.

“I have no idea. I’ll have to have Lucien ask the sage. I’m hoping it’s self-explanatory,” Fale looked unconvinced.

“Don’t worry. It will all work out. The mages wouldn’t send you on a wild ghost chase.” Keron put his arm around the back of Fale’s chair. She thought about how secretive the mages seemed to be and wondered if they were indeed being sent on a wild hunt for the unknown.

The oven buzzer went off and Fale took out the brownies. “I hope you’re right. Since we can’t go anywhere until we hear from Lucien, can I make anyone coffee?”

“Let’s do the dishes first,” Izzy said. “Then we’ll be ready for brownies and coffee.”

“Why don’t you let Lisle and me do the dishes?” Keron said.

“It’s not a problem,” Fale said. “We can all do them.”

“Go take a shower and relax,” he said.

“He’s a keeper,” Izzy whispered, poking Fale in the side.

“Really, Fale, we’ve got it,” Lisle said.

“All right.” Fale wiped her hands on a dish towel. By the time she joined her friends in the living room around the coffee table, Izzy was pouring coffee and the pan of brownies sat on a hot pad in the middle of the coffee table.

Fale was about to sit on the couch when Lucien knocked on the door, so she turned to answer it instead. She greeted Lucien and, with some surprise, Ash. “Come in. We were about to have dessert. Can I get either of you some coffee?”

“I’ll take some,” Ash said. Fale left to get another cup from the kitchen. She reemerged to find Keron making introductions. Lucien and Ash sat in the two arm chairs and Lisle, Izzy and



Keron sat on the couch facing them. Fale sat on the floor at Keron's feet and rested her back against the couch between his knees. Keron smoothed her hair, and laid his hand possessively on her shoulder. Izzy poured coffee for everyone and served brownies.

When everyone was comfortable, Fale asked Lucien, "Do you know where the machine is?"

Lucien looked to Ash, "We do."

Ash continued, "It's not a place on the map of Algea. It's an island named Everlign across the globe." He let his news sink in, waiting for the inevitable questions. It didn't take long.

"What do you mean, across the globe?" Keron asked.

"You are familiar with our planet's shape?" Lucien asked.

"Our world is a circle, but are you saying it has another side?" Keron looked confused.

"Yes," Lisle answered. "It's a sphere." He looked at Keron and made the shape with his hands. Keron had very little schooling and it wasn't necessary for an average citizen to know about what may or may not lay beyond Algea. There was no other map than the flat map of Algea and the Isles above it.

"It's like a ball? And the island is where?" Keron was catching on.

"The island is on the other side of our planet. When we have day, they have night," Lucien informed.

"We were always taught Algea and the Isles were the only human dwelling land masses," Lisle said.

"How do you even know this place exists?" Keron asked.

"Our sage has seen it," Ash said with a superior tone.

Lucien looked at him disapprovingly, "We know of the place. And it has been written in

our documents Queen Effailya had hidden the machine on an island. But had not revealed the location as being Everligne until you described the landscape and markers.”

“How did she get it there?” Fale asked.;

“We don’t know, but the queen did have a gift of particle mobility,” Lucien said.

“What’s that?” asked Keron.

“She could manipulate the particles in objects to move them from one place to another. It’s how we assume she got it there, although it could have been done by teleporting. The queen was powerful in her original form,” Ash said, sipping his coffee leisurely. “The machine itself is alive. She had put the machine to sleep when she realized Gryndoll was greedy for power which only made him hungry for her crown. You know what happened when she turned down his marriage proposal. On her deathbed, Effailya used her gift to move the machine from Alloy City to Everligne.”

“Why does the stone have the same sign as the front of the house?” Fale asked.

“That’s your sign, Fale,” Lucien said. Fale was obviously confused. “Rather, it was Effailya’s sign.”

“You’ll have to ask someone when you get there,” Ash said. “We don’t know why your sign is there either.”

“How are we going to get there?” Lisle asked. “We can’t have our particles manipulated, or whatever.”

“Our sage has limited teleportal gifts. She can get all of you to our coterie estate in the mountains and we can give you supplies and mounts, but then you have to get to the coast where a freighter will be waiting for you.”

“How big is this island?” Izzy asked.

“Not much bigger than Alloy City,” Ash said, “but it is connected to others.”

“Why is it not on the map?” Fale questioned. “Why aren’t we taught about a globe?”

“I can’t explain everything now, but Algeans don’t sail around the planet and do not know they are there. As far as Everligne goes, the natives prefer you are taught that way. They mean to live in secret. They wish to live independently of Algea and free from persecution for being mages.” Lucien said, “And we honor their wish.”

“How is it you know they are there and the wizards do not?” Lisle asked.

Lucien smiled. “We know of every location of mages on this planet, hidden or known. They are protected from the wizards’ knowledge, by being heavily warded. Their inherited magic borders reside within the nature that surrounds them and are unrivaled by any of the wizards’ spells.”

“Especially because the wizards don’t know to look for them,” added Ash with a sly grin.

“When do we leave?” Fale asked.

“How soon can you be ready?” Ash asked.

“Hold on. It will not be an easy journey,” Lucien interjected, “there need to be preparations.”

Fale looked to her companions. Izzy shrugged, “I’m packed,” she said.

Lisle said, “Me too.”

Keron, always thinking, said, “We’ll have to take care of the food and pack our clothes. Will you be giving us dry food and soap, or will we need to buy those things? What about bedding?”

Lucien smiled generously at Keron. “Good thinking, wardsman; we will provide all the supplies you need. Just bring your clothing and personal items. Make sure you can hike and ride in what you bring. How are you adjusting to your new role?”

Keron sat up straighter. “It feels good to be called wardsman instead of bondsman. It seems like a title of honor rather than one of shame. I have always hated being owned. From the first day, when they gave me the seal of the Agency on my stainless-valezsan arm, I knew I belonged to them. Now I can feel the first winds of freedom under my wings.”

Fale asked, “Is that how you get here? By teleportal?”

“Of course,” Ash said in an exasperated tone.

“Ash is my *impatient* apprentice,” Lucien admonished. “We do arrive here by teleportal. It is safe and instant.”

“But you knock on the door,” Fale argued.

“Out of courtesy for you.” Lucien smiled at Fale as a father might to a child. His kindness made her heart ache for her parents and Nelson. It was time to get this show going.

“I want to leave as soon as possible,” she said.

“We will ready the guest cabin for you then. Ash and I will be back to collect you tomorrow,” Lucien said rising from his chair. Ash rose as well, meekly following his mentor after his public reprimand.

Keron saw the mages out as Fale collected dishes and took them to the kitchen. Lucien spoke to Keron alone at the door at length, and the men parted ways. Keron immediately retreated into the bedroom, closing the door. Fale and Izzy, washing coffee mugs, gave each other a questioning glance. Fale shrugged her shoulders.

When they were finished, Fale gathered more blankets and a pillow for Izzy. Lisle offered to take the floor so Izzy could have the couch and they began talking between themselves, so Fale excused herself. Fale readied herself for bed while Keron lay quietly, already facing away from her. She turned down the lantern and slipped under the sheets. “Is everything all right?” she asked.

“No,” Keron answered.

“What’s wrong? I saw you talking with Lucien. Did he say something?”

“He...he just made me realize something.”

“What is it?” she asked nervously.

“I can’t be everything for you,” Keron turned over to face her. “I can’t be both the protector of this mission, and your boyfriend, lover, whatever. It will make me sloppy, I could pay too much attention to you, and not the danger lurking around the next corner. I’m not only in charge of protecting you anymore. I have Iz and Lisle to think about. Lucien is counting on me to do this job. This is who I am now, and my feelings get in the way.”

“What are you saying? Are you refusing to be my wardsman?” she asked.

“No, Fale.”

“Are you breaking up with me?” Fale’s quiet voice broke. “You can’t. You promised.”

“I know I did, Fale, and I still lo-“

“Don’t. Don’t say it now. Not for the first time. Not like this.” The world shifted, and she felt the floor drop out from under her. Fale’s heart was shattering into billions of pieces, but she imagined herself holding the pieces together so she wouldn’t fall apart. She didn’t want him to see her losing it.

“Fine,” he said. “But I do.”

Fale’s eyes filled with unshed tears. *I will not cry. I have lived four lives to fight this fight and I can do this.* Fale slipped the ring off her finger. “I guess I need to give this back to you.” She held it out to him.

“No, Fale. Keep it. It was a gift. You can’t give back my heart.”

“You just gave back mine,” her voice was soaked in acid.

“Fale, please understand. I am still part of you, I’m a different part. I’m your guard. I will give my life for you, but my head has to be clear to make the best decisions.”

“I make my own good decisions,” Fale snapped.

“Then we’ll make a better team, your highness. You wanted your independence, now you’ll have it,” he said sincerely.

“It doesn’t mean I wanted to be alone. I wanted to be an independent woman, not a needy girl, and don’t call me that,” she spat.

“I’m sorry Spr- Fale.”

“You know what? I don’t care,” she said. “I didn’t need you three years ago and I don’t need you now.”

“Yes, you do.” He touched the angry tear sliding down her face, shaming her.

“Don’t touch me. Don’t ever touch me again.” She turned over, giving him her back and reigned in her tears.

*I will not cry over any man.*

She tried her hardest to master this pain, but it ached into her bones. She lay awake for hours listening to Keron’s breathing slow and grow shallow. She remembered every other night she’d spent in this bed with him and let her heart fracture into shards of glass.

## CHAPTER 19

The morning sun woke Fale with a headache. Her eyes were dry and throbbing as she looked at the empty side of the bed next to her. Keron was up early, or she had slept late. She glanced at her watch; nine o'clock. She had slept late. She changed into denims and a deep blue t-shirt that would hopefully make her look better than she felt. She couldn't wait to start this journey. She was finally ready- there was no turning back now. Lucien was taking forever. The sooner she could leave, the sooner she could begin to heal.

Smelling much-needed coffee coming from the kitchen, Fale headed that direction. *If he looks at me with pity, I swear I will punch him in the throat, or at least flip him off.* Fale entered the kitchen to find her three companions around the table chattering about their journey, drinking coffee and eating toast.

"She rises," Lisle said.

"You look terrible," Izzy remarked.

"Want coffee?" Keron held up a cup and smiled like nothing had happened. Had she dreamt last night?

Fale sat between Izzy and Keron, taking the cup. "Thank you," she said, confused. He poured her cup and added two sugars and one cream, but didn't kiss her or touch her in any way. A piece of toast was soon in front of her and Fale loaded it with blackberry jam. "Is everyone packed but me?" she asked.

"No," Izzy said. "We were just having breakfast and waiting for you, princess."

"Quit calling me that," Fale replied much harsher than she'd meant.

"Sorry, Fale. It was a joke," Izzy said, looking heart-broken.

"Geez, Fale. Way to overreact," Lisle said.

“I’m sorry. I had a hard night,” Fale explained.

“Too much information,” Izzy sang.

“It’s not like that, Iz.” Fale sighed. “I have a headache.”

*And I need to go rescue my people before I kill something.*

“Oh,” Izzy said blankly.

“I can rub your neck,” Lisle said. “If Keron doesn’t mind.”

Keron opened his mouth and Fale smiled sweetly, “He doesn’t care at all, Lisle.”

Keron schooled his features and said, “Go ahead, if it’ll make her feel better.”

Izzy narrowed her eyes at Keron and Fale. “Is something up?”

“Nothing at all,” Fale said. She didn’t feel like explaining the breakup to Lisle and Izzy. Her heart was breaking and she couldn’t deal with the questions that would follow, or the pity in their eyes.

Keron frowned. “Nothing,” he agreed.

Izzy obviously didn’t buy it by the expression on her face, but she finished her toast. Then she packed her bag in the living room. Fale soon followed and was packing her clothes when Keron entered and shut the bedroom door.

“Are we pretending?” he asked.

“So, I didn’t dream it? I didn’t think so when you gave in to Lisle so easily,” she said.

“No, you didn’t dream it.”

*There is the pity look. Damn.*

“I didn’t feel like making a breakfast table announcement,” she said.

“We can’t keep it a secret long.” He crossed his arms and leaned back to rest his shoulder



against the door.

“It’ll come out,” she assured him.

“Oh, and I do care if Lisle touches you,” he said, his jaw clenching.

“Well, you don’t get to care anymore,” she said. “*Sorry.*”

He crossed the room and grabbed the back of her head, pulling her into his kiss. Keron kissed her as if she were his last breath, desperately wanting more. He broke away. “I had to do it one last time,” he said. She slapped him across the face. Hard.

“If you EVER do that again, it’d better be because you’re staying forever.” She turned away from his stunned face and began packing again.

~\*~

Lisle and Izzy had already packed. They were sitting on the couch playing cards when Keron left the bedroom. He walked blindly into the kitchen to bag up their fresh food to take to the mages. He could hear Fale in the living room. Had she really slapped him? Where had that strength come from? From the living room, he heard her moan in pleasure and memories of her in his arms floated through his mind. What was going on in there? Keron peeked his head out of the kitchen to see Fale sitting on the floor between Lisle’s knees with her head back, eyes closed and mouth open. Lisle’s hands were on his girl, rubbing her head and neck. Keron saw red. No, not his girl anymore. She was her own now- and a woman. Had he made a mistake? He went back to bagging up food. There was nothing he could do about it now. He had a job to do. Get the princess to the machine- after that he would see where they stood. But he couldn’t make her hold onto her hope. What if someone better came along for her? He wouldn’t stand in the way. Keron would be damned if it would be Lisle right in front of him, though. It was too much. Still,

if it was Fale's choice... this was going to hurt like hell.

~\*~

Lucien and Ash appeared at ten 'til noon, in the living room. Ash grinned when Izzy shrieked.

"Whoa," Lisle said slowly.

Fale smiled wanly. "That was so cool. You just appeared out of nowhere."

Lucien asked, "Where's Keron?"

"In here," Keron came from the kitchen carrying bags of food and offered them to Lucien. "For you. We can't eat it. Maybe it will help make up for some of our supplies."

"How thoughtful of you," Lucien bowed his head.

"Are you all ready to go?" Ash asked.

"We are." Fale anxiously switched from one foot to another. The others watched her with their excitement mounting. The sense of urgency permeated the room.

"If everyone would hold the items they intend to take with them, we will be on our way," Lucien directed.

Fale and Keron both reached for her bags, but she took them. Even though they were heavy, she stood on her own. She had promised to herself to be independent and now Keron was giving her the ultimate test of that vow.

Fale had two large duffel bags and a backpack, plus her shoulder bag. Keron had two large duffels and his guitar case, Izzy had a large and a small duffel, and Lisle had a soft suitcase and a full backpack.

Lucien spoke into a communication device. "Tell Madam Alesina we are ready, please."

"Is she your sage?" Fale asked.

"Yes," Lucien smiled. "Alesina Sevedge."

"Will we get to meet her?" Fale asked.

Fale's entire body tingled like the circulation had been cut off. Fractals of various colors appeared around her in interlocking octagons. Sounds of windchimes rushed past her ears, increasing in volume until she thought she could bear no more. Instantly they were transferred to a dark cavernous room, all carved out of black rock, but smoothed to a brilliant shine. They stood in front of what looked to be a black marble throne; the room dimly lit with hundreds of white orbs in various sizes, resembling stars in the night sky. On the throne perched a small woman crowned with silver hair, laced in streaks of fiery auburn. She slid from the polished stone seat and stood a great four feet tall. As she looked at all four in the party, Alesina crooked a finger at Fale and said, "Come child."

The woman wore a turquoise blue dress down to her bare, tanned feet. She grasped Fale's hand in her deceptively silky soft vice grip. She touched her other hand to Fale's forehead.

"Ah, the queen has returned." At the announcement, people Fale hadn't noticed along the periphery of the room began to applaud.

*For me.*

"Yes, for you," cackled the older woman.

Fale stepped back to break her connection with the woman. "Who are you?" she asked.

The woman bowed. "Alesina Sevedge, Your Highness."

“You don’t have to call me that,” Fale said.

The people murmured amongst themselves. “Are you not Queen Effailya Aeromin Oakenhearst?”

“Technically I was, I guess. But right now, I’m just Fale Argohdian.”

“So, you do not choose to be queen?” Madam Alesina asked.

“I choose to do the duty of the queen, but remain Fale,” she said. She didn’t want to have to become Effailya to be the queen.

“Can this be done?” Madam Alesina asked again.

“Can’t you tell me?” Fale sighed. “I don’t have the answers. I’m willing to fight this battle. I just want to do it on my terms.”

“Ask your wardsman if a person can have two identities at a time,” Madam Alesina said.

Fale thought the statement cruel and was done talking to the old woman. Keron had already told her he couldn’t be a boyfriend and a wardsman at the same time.

*So, the answer is no?*

“The answers are one and the same,” Madam Alesina said not to her, but to Keron.

Fale didn’t want to think about her broken relationship right now. So, she asked Lucien, “Are we inside the mountain?”

“One of them, yes. Let me show you around our estate.”

“I will see you again, child,” Madam Alesina reminded Fale, much to her chagrin. Fale didn’t get a warm feeling from Alesina, and the woman spoke in riddles. She didn’t know if she liked this sage. Alesina made her feel like a foolish child, and Fale wanted to scream at her. She had a feeling this woman could be trouble for them. She heard the sage laugh as they left.

The view from the guest cabin was breathtaking. Blue mountains capped with snow surrounded them and tall wildflowers grew in spurts among fields of trees as tall as any building Fale had seen in Alloy City. There was so much color. Fale wanted to hold Keron's hand and walk through it all, share the beauty with him, instead she stood at the window longingly.

"Why don't you take a walk?" Lisle asked coming up next to her.

"I don't feel like being out there alone," Fale answered.

"I'll go get Keron."

"No," she said quickly. "Please don't."

"Why not?" Lisle questioned.

"We broke up, Lisle," she whispered.

"Oh."

To his credit, Lisle didn't try to say everything would be all right or it would all work out. He simply put his arm around her and said, "Let's go, then," and led Fale outside.

Lisle was quiet and let Fale talk. She explained how Keron had broken her heart three years ago and what it meant for her to trust him again, only to have him choose to be her guard over being her lover. Lisle held Fale's hand and picked passing flowers, making a bunch to cheer her up.

"Don't worry, Fale. You have Izzy and me here. We'll be your companions and he can be your guard. And if another lover comes along, then we'll make him jealous."

"We're probably making him jealous as it is, Lisle. He's not very good at sharing," she rolled her eyes.

"He can't share what he gave up. And I'm not about to let you waste this journey of a lifetime. I mean, look at this beautiful place. Have you ever been to the mountains?"

“No,” Fale looked around her at the lush grass, bending trees and soft, bright colors surrounding her.

“Have you ever ridden a horse? Been to the coast? Seen the ocean? Been in a boat?” he asked.

“No,” she laughed.

“Me neither.” He smiled. “And I am not going to let Keron ruin it for either of us.” Lisle grabbed Fale’s hand and raised it, spinning her around. She laughed out loud.

“Thank you, Lisle. I needed that.”

“What, this?” He spun her again and again.

“Stop. I’m getting dizzy,” she cried. “I meant I needed your friendship and support. And the pep talk. So much has happened, I feel like my heart has a scab that keeps getting picked off before the gash can heal. I’m wounded, but I’m so glad you’re here.” Lisle handed her the bouquet of flowers he picked and they strolled back to their cabin hand in hand, taking the long way around to tour the estate on their own.

Lucien met them on a side path and informed them supplies would be ready soon.

“Should we leave today?” Fale asked

“You should discuss it with your wardsman,” Lucien advised.

Fale’s temper flared. “What did you say to him last night, Lucien?”

“Did he not tell you? I suggested he do so.” Lucien looked concerned.

“He said he couldn’t be my boyfriend anymore because he was my guard and you were trusting him to do a job,” Fale explained.

“Oh dear,” Lucien exhaled. “Perhaps I should...”

“You won’t change his mind,” Fale said. “He is too stubborn. Leave it be before you make

it any worse.”

“I see. I would suggest, young Fale, you leave in the early morning to get the most out of your traveling day. It will take two days to get down the mountain and another five days to reach the coast,” Lucien said. “I have given Keron all the information he should need to make it, since this is your first experience in the wild. He is a wildly successful student.”

“A whole week?” Lisle asked.

“It won’t be an easy journey,” Lucien warned.

“Why can’t we just teleport?” Fale asked.

“First, we don’t know exactly where to teleport you, that’s why you are seeking the machine. Second, the only one with the ability to teleport you is the sage. She believes this journey is one the queen must make, and she refuses to use her teleportal gifts,” Lucien replied.

“Oh, great. I knew I didn’t like that woman,” Fale groaned.

Lucien gave Fale a fatherly look, “We trust her. You should, too.”

“How dangerous can it be?” Lisle said. “It’s like camping out. I’ve heard some people do it for fun.”

Lucien chuckled, “We will prepare you for the environment and provide any supplies you will need, like survival gear. It can be harder than you realize to go camping in the mountains and the jungle. The air is thick and hot at the base of the mountain.”

“We’ll be careful,” Fale promised.

“We’ll all be together,” Lisle said, smiling at Fale. She smiled back.

Lucien cleared his throat. “Don’t be too hard on your wardsman, he has a good heart.”

“I know,” Fale said. “It’s just not mine to worry about anymore.”

Lucien nodded once. “I will come to your cabin when everything is ready, and let you

know.”

“That’s not necessary,” Fale said. “We can tell Keron and Izzy about leaving in the morning, and we’ll talk to you at supper.”

“Well done, thank you. We will be expecting you for a banquet, then. Your mounts will be ready in the morning at dawn in the square outside the main hall,” Lucien told them.

“Isn’t it where we’re eating tonight?” Lisle pointed down the path toward the open yard surrounded by community buildings.

“Yes, very observant,” Lucien smiled genuinely at Lisle.

“We’ll be there,” Fale said.

Keron and Izzy had already showered and changed for supper by the time Lisle and Fale returned, laughing and pink cheeked. “Where have you been?” Keron demanded.

“We took a walk in the field.” Fale held up her fistful of wilted wildflowers. “Then we toured the campus and talked to Lucien.”

“Again?” Izzy asked. “Keron was worried.”

“Well, I’m sorry you were worried, but I was perfectly safe with Lisle,” Fale said to Keron.

“Next time tell me where you’re going when you leave,” he said.

“You’re my guard, not my father. I’ll tell you if I need you to go with me. Now I am going to take a shower. Alone,” she said as saucily as she could.

“What is with her?” Izzy asked as Fale left the room.

“Nothing,” Fale called.

“Nothing.” Keron sighed.



Lisle finally understood the conversation from breakfast that morning. "I'm going to get my clothes and shower, too." He went into the other bathroom and quickly showered, putting on dark blue denims and a crisp white buttoned shirt, open over a t-shirt. He wore his brown hemp necklace and black leather shoes.

Fale appeared twenty minutes later in her royal blue kimono, her hair brushed to a sheen and straight as a pin. It was parted down the middle and her complexion was ruddy from the afternoon sun. Keron was staring and looked away.

"Dang, I did a good job making her beautiful. What do you think, Keron?" Izzy asked.

"She looks nice," Keron said.

"Nice?" Izzy asked.

"I think she looks gorgeous," Lisle said and offered Fale his arm. She took it.

"Oh, Lucien says we should leave at dawn. Our horses will be in the square," Fale announced to Izzy and Keron.

"Thank you," Keron said.

"No problem," Fale answered. Lisle led her out the door and Keron's jaw flexed. He offered his arm to a very confused and suspicious Izzy who took it and they followed. Fale avoided Izzy's gaze.

She couldn't tell Izzy about the split just yet. Fale was humiliated by Keron's actions once again, and she didn't want to hear Izzy say 'I told you so.' Or worse, the pity on Izzy's face would make Fale unable to take this trip. Her pride kept her mouth shut. She would tell Izzy soon, if Iz didn't guess it on her own.

## CHAPTER 20

The mages had planned a special supper for the queen and her small court as they passed through. They had roasted duck. The mages raised their own livestock and produce. It was the first time Fale had ever had fresh meat. It was delectable, with roasted potatoes and peas and a carrot salad. The rich meat practically melted in her mouth, saturated with flavor, and served with sauce. The food was so good, Fale wondered what the kitchen was packing for their journey. It almost made her want to stay, but she had responsibilities now.

Fale looked around at all the people, *her* people. They were all banking on her. It was paralyzing. What if she was unsuccessful? She looked at her friends and wiped sweaty palms against her hips. At least she wasn't on her own. Fale still didn't know if she was cut out to be a queen, but it was that or ignore the plight of the slaves. She couldn't leave them there. Besides, it was *her* key that would be the one to set the people free. She *had* to go.

"How do you find our estate, Your high-, ah, Fale?" asked one of the council members, a middle-aged woman with the ruddy complexion of a shepherd.

"It's beautiful," Fale said genuinely. "I had the opportunity to tour it today and your workmanship is excellent. The scenery couldn't be more appropriate for a magical place."

The woman beamed at Fale. *About time I said something right.* The man on her other side replied, "We are honored to have you stay here. Especially on the eve of such a monumental excursion."

Fale smiled graciously. "My partners and I thank you, sir." She could feel Keron's stare as Lisle patted her hand in appreciation of a job well done. She heard the man asking Keron his plans for getting them down the mountain and looked at his profile, wanting to run her fingers through the black hair curling at his neck, fresh from his shower.

“We leave in the morning. I figure it should take us about two days to get down the mountain and we will camp at sunset, making a fire and finding water first,” he said. Fale was impressed, Keron was taking this seriously. According to what Lucien had told Lisle and her about the time it would take, Keron had come to the right conclusions. He would be quizzed on survival skills by the mages before they left. Fale felt like she knew a few things about wilderness survival from reading books, but she was glad to know Keron would have some training. Especially as their Wardsman.

“Don’t forget,” the man reminded Keron, “there are wild animals in the mountains that eat humans.”

Izzy’s head swung around. “What?”

“Bears, wild cats, panthers, cougars, lynx and falling rocks all kill people in these mountains. It’s one of the reasons we are at this altitude. We’re safe up so high,” the man said confidently.

“Can I change my mind?” Izzy laughed nervously.

He grinned at her, “They are easy enough to defeat, if you have fire and weapons, and if they don’t come in the night.”

“Please tell me we have a tent,” Izzy begged.

“We’ll find out,” Keron said.

“I’m sleeping between you and Fale then,” Izzy said like a child. “She has fire and you have weapons.”

*She’s probably prophetic, because we won’t be sleeping next to each other anymore.*

“I have weapons, too, Izzy,” Fale said.

They toasted with champagne and indulged in the bounty of the worker’s fruit for dessert. The mountain mages toasted Fale as their Queen, and the group members as warriors, then

Keron as the Wardsman. Then the new court of Queen Fale was toasted as they began their expedition to find the machine, saving the lost people of Garrith. By the time they were done, everyone was at least tipsy. Fale was magnanimous in her thanks on behalf of the whole party and the mages doted on her.

Someone began a chant, "Down with the wizards, punish Control!" Everyone joined in the chant, but as Fale lifted her fist and sang along, she saw Izzy staring wide-eyed at her. Through her fuzzy thoughts, she wondered why Izzy would look at her that way, but she was enjoying the party and decided not to let it distract her from the festivities.

When the noise died down and everyone was leaving, Fale felt a hand on her arm. "You look like a newborn animal," Keron chuckled.

"My equilibrium is off from the champagne," Fale said, attempting to get out of her chair.

Keron lifted her from the chair and stood Fale in front of him, keeping her within the circle of his arms. "Walk," he told her. "I've got you."

Fale took wobbling steps forward and saw Izzy and Lisle walking arm in arm ahead of them. "Are you coming, Fale?" Izzy asked.

"Yep," Fale said, popping her mouth at the end of the word.

Lisle looked back, "Do you need a hand, Fale? I can come back."

"I have her, Lisle," Keron growled.

"Fale?" Lisle asked.

"It's okay," Fale said. "I'll be right, *hic*, there." Lisle and Izzy proceeded out the door.

"He knows, doesn't he?" Keron asked.

"I am not talking about this now." Fale pitched to the side. "Whoa."

Keron caught her. "Okay, not now," he relented. "Where did you go today?"

“Into the woods.”

“What did you do?” he asked.

“Talked to Lisle and picked flowers.”

“Did you have fun?” He held the door for her and they said goodnight to some of the mages.

“I had fun,” she said when they were outside. “Oh, lookit the stars, Keron. You can’t see them like this in Alloy City.” She stopped him and they stared at the stars for several minutes. Fale rested the top of her head on Keron’s chest as he insisted on standing behind her, to keep her from falling over, in the circle of his arms.

Keron gazed down at her. “Fale, maybe I-“

“I been thinkin’. This is good for us, you know? I can do my job freeing my people and you can be my guard,” Fale said. She sneaked a look at his face. She wanted him to miss what he had so carelessly tossed aside, and make a final decision to be with her, or not. She couldn’t go through systematic rejection with him anymore. Her heart couldn’t take it.

He stood up taller, “Yeah. Maybe I should get you to bed.”

She slurred, “Let’s go slow. The globe’s spinning an’ I wanna lookit the stars.”

Keron held Fale’s arm and led her slowly down the gravel path to the guest cabin.

The interior was dim when they finally reached the one- bedroom cabin. Fale sat down on the wooden porch chair and Keron perched on the arm to wait for her. “Are we sleeping together?” Fale asked.

“Up to you, I guess,” Keron said.

“It might be easier if I slept in the bed with Izzy,” she said. “You and Lisle can have the couches.”

"If that's what you want."

*It's not.*

"Okay," she grumbled.

They sat in awkward silence for several minutes, then Keron stood. He opened the door for her and Fale felt her way in the dark. Izzy and Lisle were already passed out on the couches, so Fale went to the bedroom. Keron followed. "I guess they left us the bed," she said.

"Want me to wake Izzy?"

"No," she said. "It's all right."

"Sorry, Spr-" he stopped. "Sorry."

"Can you help me with this knot?" Fale's kimono was tied by a thin cord around the sash.

"Sure," Keron worked with steady hands on the knot and unwound the sash from her middle, handing it to her.

"Thank you," she whispered.

"You're welcome."

"Turn around?" she asked.

"Oh, yeah. Sure." He handed her the lavender pajama set and turned around until he heard the bedsprings bend. Then he tucked her under the comforter. Keron put on his cotton pants and slid into the bed resisting the urge to pull Fale to his shoulder. "Good night," he said in a deep voice not his own.

"Goodnight," she echoed in a strangled voice, not belonging to her either. "Is it sad that I miss you already?"

"No. I miss you, too."

"Go to sleep before this champagne makes me say something else stupid," Fale said. Keron

chuckled.

Fale woke to the noise of a zipper. “Rise up, shiny Fale.” Keron was picking up his duffel bag, already dressed in denims and a white t-shirt poking out from under a navy sweatshirt.

“It’s still dark,” she whined.

“We leave at dawn,” he said.

The overhead light flipped on. “You woke me up and she’s not out of bed yet?” Izzy complained.

“I’m up,” Fale said. “I’m just not dressed yet.”

“Well hurry up, Lisle and I want to eat breakfast before we go, and your taskmaster says we leave at dawn,” Izzy said.

“I know,” Fale groaned. “I’m getting up now.” She threw back the covers and dug in her bag for denims and a pink t-shirt with a soft gray button-up sweater. Her suede boots had seen better days, but they would be handy for riding, so she put them on. Keron came back in and zipped up Fale’s luggage after she brushed her teeth and they each carried their bags to the square. The council mage’s apprentices appeared to attach the group’s baggage to the horses while they ate. A breakfast of real eggs, orange juice and flatcakes waited for Fale and her friends. As they ate, Keron was briefed again on things he would need to know. The mages gave him a survival guide to read when he could. Fale’s court said their farewells to the mages who had risen to see them off. The excitement was palpable.

As Fale traveled down the row of the council, gaining advice, shaking hands and exchanging hugs with some of the more affectionate mothers and fathers, she found herself standing in front of the sage. The older woman was dressed in a shapeless, flowy purple dress dancing with the spring mountain breeze.

“Alesina.” Fale tipped her head toward the woman in a respectful gesture.

The woman snorted. “You’re not fooling me, young one.”

“Fine. Why won’t you teleportal us to Everlign? Why the journey? Why the riddles?”

“It is through the process of solving the problem that the answer is found,” Alesina sang.

“Grrr.” Fale threw up her hands and whispered, “You know what? I think you’re crazy.”

She was turning to go, when the sage’s hand shot out and pulled her back around, nearly causing Fale to fall on top of her.

“You need to be careful,” the old woman said close to Fale’s ear.

“Yes, I know. Bears, and wildcats, and all the danger-”

“No. Remember Vivyan and Corrine. You must learn from their mistakes.”

Fale was frustrated, “What are you talking about? The time wasn’t right for Vivyan or Corrine. They never fought.”

The sage cackled a tiny laugh. “Everyone thinks it is their time to fight. Didn’t you think they would have wanted to try to rescue the people?”

“I guess I hadn’t thought much about it. I have been so absorbed with my own quest.” Fale felt like a stone was lying in the bottom of her stomach. “What did happen to them?”

“Oh, now you want to know? Even though I am crazy?”

“Yes, I’m sorry. Please tell me,” Fale begged.

“Vivyan was betrayed by her wardsman and captured by the wizards when she went to find the key to the machine. She managed to send the key back to the estate by the messenger bird she took with her, but she was thrown into the dungeon. Gryndoll had been the only royal wizard for Effailya’s family, but by then there was a whole village of wizards and apprentices. They were taught Effailya was their enemy in any form and she would come back one day to punish and



eliminate them. Vivyan was rescued after six years, but she never did magic again. The mages' only score was the acquisition of the key."

"And Corrine?" Fale encouraged the sage.

"That girl knew the machine was on an island, but we never knew which one until now. Corrine was a headstrong young woman with new powers, and she took off on horseback on a journey to find the machine. She went alone, without a wardsman to betray her, and the wizards set a trap for her on the mountain. Left for dead, she could no longer finish the fight. The technology didn't exist back then to make her journey possible, and no one could heal her from the extent of her damage."

"Do you think they're coming after me, then?" She would have to rethink their whole plan to include the wizards.

"They tried to take you at birth, and fell back when your father heard your mother's screams and interrupted them. When your father was seen with an infant, they must have realized they bungled the crime and have probably watched you from afar. We assume they have changed tactics and they are watching you now to follow you to the machine."

"Why didn't anyone tell me this?" Fale asked.

"Not to influence your decisions or scare you," Alesina said in a condescending tone and patted Fale's hand like a child.

"So why did you tell me? Do you want to scare me?"

The two women looked into each other's eyes and the sage said, "I believe knowledge is power."

Fale nodded once in acknowledgement and thanks, then turned and walked away. This would be her secret. A few days ago, she would not have worried that Keron would betray her. *He wouldn't, would he?* There were miles between them, had she really even known him at all?

She felt like a traitor to her own heart, but she could not jump in anymore without looking first. She had no idea if there would be traps set up for her on the mountain. If the wizards wanted the machine as badly as she did, it was in their best interest to keep her alive. Though, she wasn't too keen on being horribly injured. She would have to be alert.

Fed, packed and mounted, Fale sat atop a snowy white mare. Keron's chestnut stallion glistened in the rising sun and the two beautiful painted horses given to Izzy and Lisle, whinnied and pranced about. Fale said one last farewell to the mages and gave thanks for all their help. The four of them looked at each other.

"Follow me," Keron said, their journey only beginning.

In an instant, however, shouts sounded from across the square.

"Protect the Queen!"

Heat seared Fale's face and she heard the crackle of burning hair around her ears. She threw her hands up to her cheeks.

"Duck!" Keron yelled.

Fale dodged the next fireball, but her horse was spooked and reared up on its hind legs. Fale screamed as she gripped the reins and leaned forward in the saddle out of instinct. She looked around to see the other horses panicking, then chaos in the square stole her attention. An alarm siren sounded. Men and women poured into the open space. With hurricane force, one man blew down the henchmen running at her. A woman with orange hair stood in front of Fale and cast a light blue shield around her, then ran off. Two wizards appeared in the center of the square and a black smoke emitted from the charms they had around their necks. Fale shook as she watched the smoke permeate the shields of the mages in front of them and choke them. Their skin darkened as well as their eyes and they each turned toward Fale with a malicious gleam in their smiles. She didn't know what to do. She wasn't prepared for this kind of magic.

“Hide her!” someone shouted.

All around her were screams and bursts of light.

“Secure the Queen!” was echoed from every direction. Someone grabbed her horse by the reins.

“What are you doing?” she yelled.

“We have to hide you,” he called back.

“No!” Fale dug her heels in and pulled the leather strip so hard, she pulled a stitch in her bicep. “I have to fight! This is *my* fight!”

A blast of light exploded off the shield around her. Fale flinched before she realized the barrier held, then she looked to the twin hooded figures and saw them floating several inches above the ground.

*That can't be good.*

The hood on the left pointed at her and a plasma bolt shot from the circlet around his finger, piercing Fale's shield and scorching her side and shoulder. Before she could react, the momentum knocked her off her horse. The world spun around her as she fought to catch her breath. Pain seared through her body, crumpling her like wadded tissue.

“No,” Lisle yelled and sprung from his mount in the direction of the hoods. Fale could see the covered wizard pull a flaming whip from his cape and lash the air around him in figure eights. The other hood, seeing Lisle's attack, raised one hand in Lisle's direction and one towards Fale.

Keron shouted a long, loud guttural howl, dropping from his horse and pulling his sword from his scabbard as he stomped across the yard, putting himself directly between Fale and the depraved wizard. She heard the first clang of metal as a mountain mage descended next to her head.

“Oh good, you’re conscious,” she lightly touched Fale’s shoulder.

“Aaaah!” Fale yelled out in pain. “What are you doing?”

“I’m healing you, your Highness. I’m sorry if it’s uncomfortable. You have extensive injuries and the tissues must tear apart and multiply to cover the wound. “Should I stop?”

“No, no. Keep going. The sooner you fix me, the sooner I can join the fight,” she eeked.

“But I don’t think-“

“Just do it,” Fale ordered with her remaining strength. She gritted her teeth against the agony of ripping flesh.

Fale stretched her neck to see the battle around the woman. Lisle had been easily jumping to dodge the whip, but the sweat on his brow showed his exertion was beginning to take a toll on his strength. Keron’s metal arm was encased in ice from the other wizard and he used the frosty weapon to punch the hood in the face. The man did a back somersault in the air and landed several feet away from Keron, out of his reach.

Two fighters stepped in her line of sight and Fale cursed. “Get out of the way,” she muttered, straining to see her friends. The mountain mage in front of her was dueling against twin swords as the small wizard pushed him back. She swung her deadly sharp blades in the shape of a butterfly, advancing as she went like a grinder chasing its meat. The man backed up, but didn’t appear to have a weapon. He stared at her with a look of pure concentration. All at once she stopped, her hands close together, sabers still arcing, her face blank. The mountain mage smiled imperceptibly and pointed back toward the fray. Fale was shocked to see the woman pivot and strike down the first wizard she saw. Like blades of a fan, she plowed straight through people, with the mage following behind her, pointing the way.

*Mind control. Whoa.*

A shout from Lisle showed that he had caught the tip of the wizard’s weapon on his arm,

where the fabric burned black and curled. He hit at the fire with his other hand. The hood with ice powers shot a barrage of pellets at Lisle, knocking him on his behind, still holding his arm. His head hit the ground with a thwack. The fire powered hood stretched his mouth into a black-toothed smile as he raised his whip to strike. The flaming rope came down, and a sword flew through the air, severing it. Lisle covered his head as the limp length of fibers fell onto him harmlessly.

“Thanks Keron,” he shouted.

Fale turned her head to see her former lover pick up the sword of a fallen man and quickly deflect a bolt of plasma. The force shoved him back, his sword arm pressed to his chest.

“Welcome,” he panted.

*I need to help. They are starting to tire.*

She watched Keron rampage, swinging his broad sword in wide arcs over each shoulder. He took the feet off the wizard with his back to Keron, to the head of another. The square was filling with blood.

“Wow, he’s a really good fighter,” Izzy said breathlessly behind Fale. She stayed astride her mount, looking ready to bolt if any action came her way.

“Yeah, but he’s outnumbered,” Fale saw a circle of wizards around Keron realize he was a threat and turn to surround him. He was suddenly on the offensive, defending rather than attacking.

“Are you almost done?” Fale screamed at the woman frantically.

“Yes your Highness, I just need to-“

“Good,” she jumped up and grabbed her swords from her saddle. “Put the shield on Izzy, I have to go,” she yelled behind her.

Immediately, a wire thin man with an amulet the size of a pear stepped in front of her. He

smiled with the same gross teeth as the other wizard. *Ick*. More importantly, he held out a sword straight at her heart. In Fale's need to get to Keron, she swung her blade up to knock his out of the way and stepped forward, but he was already there. His sword rising to her throat, she leapt into action and countered his swing with her own. Blades crashing together, edge to edge, she used the force of his push to her advantage. She pulled her sword back and stepped to the side as he shot forward taking a few steps. He spun, weapon out, and again she met his thrust with a wide arcing blow.

There was clanging and chinging and booming surrounding her. She could almost taste the sour tang of the blood she smelled. Fale could feel the pommel of her sword, hot and slippery in her fist. Grunts and cries rang out like a death song. And she began to dance. Lightly she stepped over hands of the fallen, bringing her blades in front of her, and twirling as she swung. She remembered being a child and holding sticks with long ribbons that flowed as she moved, up and down, back and forth, in circles. She felt the same way. The blood rushing in her ears held a steady drum beat for her macabre performance.

When opponents struck high, she swung low. When they came at her heart, she batted them away with twin swords blurring. When she had decimated a halo of dead wizards around herself, she took a deep breath, and remembered her friends. Scanning the square, Fale desperately searched for Keron. He wasn't in sight and panic rose in her chest.

*Where is he?*

She saw Lisle back at the horses, holding Izzy's reins, trying to calm both animals and pulling an amulet from his bag. With one hand, he slipped the necklace over his head. It lit up with a bright red light as he spoke words she could not hear. Cries of pain and triumph arose from the square. She turned to see Keron swing his valezsán arm in a great arc and plant his fist in the chest of a man who flew backward, his arms and legs thrown out in front of him. She ran to help him, a new light blue shield encapsulating her. Power. She felt a surge of strength run

through her veins, a jolt of electricity, her head felt like she had a caffeine rush. She was invincible. Fire shot from her outstretched palms and the men in front of her screamed as they fell, burning from their clothes, their skin crackling.

“Keron, look out!” she called.

He ducked under a wooden pole with an iron axe at the end. Fale was furious. She pushed the man back with her fire and slid into his chest with her shoulder. He fell backward, dropping the axe. She reached down and picked it up, throwing it to Keron.

“Thanks,” he said, his face a mask of concentration. He put his back to Fale’s and they punched and kicked the men surrounding them. One fell away and another one would arrive. The square was shrouded in smoke, streaks of fire and colored balls of light flying overhead like lit arrows. The wizards were ringed by mages, the fight was evenly matched, and their power was failing. Lucien ran up to Fale and Keron, along with several other men and women who began to take down the henchmen.

“You need to leave. NOW.” He grabbed them both by the arm.

Keron nodded, but Fale took in the fight just beginning to slow.

“We can’t leave you,” she yelled, reaching up to disintegrate a wooden object flying at her.

“You have to,” Lucien insisted. “I have seen them. More wizards are coming. We can hold them off, but you need to go.”

“NO!” Fale’s impassioned voice wasn’t her own.

Keron turned to her. “Fale, listen to him! We can’t fight the wizards yet, you aren’t ready.”

She shook her head frantically. “What if you can’t hold them?”

Lucien pleaded with her desperately, “We can’t protect you from what is coming. We weren’t prepared.” He turned to Keron. “You must take her.”

Keron picked Fale up around her middle and lifted her feet off the ground. She reached out to Lucien. “Keron, no. We have to help them.”

“Think Fale,” he shouted. “They are buying us time.”

She stilled in his arms. “Okay, put me down! Let’s go! Get Lisle!”

Keron set her down and they ran to the horses. She would let them fight her battle this time, but when she returned she was going to mete out justice. Fale angrily swung her leg up into the saddle. Keron jumped onto his mount and spurred it toward Lisle who was in front of Izzy, his amulet shooting bolts of red energy down his outstretched arm. Fale had never seen him so lethal before. His hand shot out red balls like a canon. Keron pointed him toward Fale.

“Let’s go!” She cupped her hands around her mouth. “Keron, which way?”

He pointed down the hill and galloped to her. “Northwest. This way.” His animal sped by in a brown blur, tearing up clods of dirt.

“Yah!” She kicked her heels into her horse’s side and ran behind him.

Lisle and Izzy raced to her side, their hoofbeats thundering along to the rhythm of Fale’s heartbeat. She tried to slow her breath as they galloped down the mountain. Facing forward she understood the weight of her new responsibilities. The scenery a blur, she could smell her own burnt hair and taste the bitter bile that rose in her throat at the thought of the mages dying in the square *for her*. The noise of battle faded away as she faced her next challenge.

The wild. The unknown. The machine.

END BOOK ONE



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

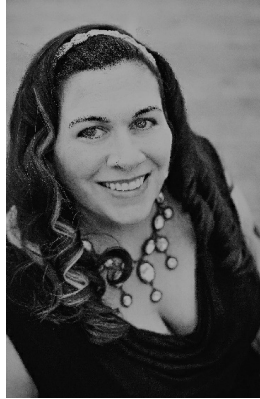
The first one I need to thank is God, for giving me all I have and all that makes this book possible. Thanks to my agent, Stephanie Hansen- thank you for late nights out and a gazillion questions. Jessi Cole, my first reader for this series- you made me think this was a good idea. Katlyn Purkapile, whose encouragement and friendship make me think I can do this. Kristin Freeman, Holly Henderson, Gail Russell, and all my best friends over the years.

My Monday writing group: Zachary, Virginia, and Lucas. Thank you for helping me brainstorm. All the student's in Dr. Luthi's creative writing classes, thank you for all the input and the critiques that made my books stronger. I appreciate every one of you who read my book and left a review! I know who you are. Thanks, to GV-ART, who made my maps into something cool. A big thank you to my editor, Jessica DeBruyn. Thank you, the reader, for choosing this book. I hope you enjoyed your time in Algea, because we are off to Everligne!

Thank you, Mom and Dad, for always encouraging my writing, my happiness, and my success. Also, Morgan and Oma for making my family complete. My family unit: David my hubsalot, Ben my bright shining star, Noah my mighty mountain, Jayna my jewel, Zachary my little warrior, and Emily my rose. Thank you for all the late nights, the dirty house, the frozen dinners. I appreciate you all, especially Dave's flexibility and Ben's story ideas and drawings. And to my sisters, Beca, Jaime, and Mindy; You guys support me with great advice, family time, and most of all, wine. Thank you everyone.

Find me on Twitter & Instagram: @haskinauthor

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR:



Jennifer Haskin is author of the YA fantasy/romance series the Freedom Fight Trilogy. She is also a portrait artist and literary consultant. Jenn lives in the Midwest with her husband and five children. When not attending writer workshops, she leads her own creative writing groups. She is a member of Savvy Authors, and Nebraska, Missouri, and Kansas City writers' guilds. Actively publishing her debut trilogy and creating a new series, she is writing full time.

[www.JenniferHaskin.com](http://www.JenniferHaskin.com)

[www.amazon.com/author/JenniferHaskin](http://www.amazon.com/author/JenniferHaskin)

## ALSO BY THE AUTHOR:

### THE QUEEN'S HEART

Freedom Flight Trilogy *Book Two*

**I'm a warrior, a princess, and a mage.**

**And war awaits me.**

The Source Wizard Gasten is using my visions to find the machine. *The race is on.* He only knows what the cave entrance looks like, not the location. *But I do.* When I find the machine, I will go to Garrith and set my people free.

**But if he finds it first, the slaves will die-** or be turned into machines that he will order to march into new dimensions, enslaving the people there, while Gasten sucks their magic dry. And it will be my fault.

I can't afford to lose *before* the war.

## CHAPTER 1

The wild ride from the mages' estate pushed the wind through Fale's hair and her heart pumped so forcefully, she brought her hand to her chest to make sure it wouldn't escape her body. Leaving the battle, their horses plunged down the side of the mountain at breakneck speed for ten minutes, but the adrenaline coursing through her system made it seem like an hour. Barely hanging on, the girl warrior held tightly to the reins and gripped the powerful horse's sides with her thighs. Finally, her guard and recently her past-love, Keron, slowed his animal to a walk.

"Everybody okay?" Keron turned in his saddle to see the other horses following his lead.

"I think we're fine now," Fale called, twisting around to watch Lisle and Izzy pulling up beside her. Lisle looked unsettled by the horse, but he had fought bravely as their wizard-in-training. Izzy's eyes were bright as she answered her best friend.

"Yeah," Izzy let out the lungful of air that had been trapped since the battle.

"What's the plan now?" Lisle pushed his horse forward to hear Keron better.

"Now, we ride down the mountain," he said.

Their journey to Everlign just beginning, they would need to find the machine said to open dimensions. Fale's people waited anxiously for her return to save them from the dimension

they were trapped in. The Source Wizard Gasten wanted the machine as much as they did, but he wasn't about to set her people free. He wanted to open new dimensions to enslave the people and steal their magic.

"Oh." Lisle let his shoulders drop. "Do you think the they're following us?"

"Don't think so. Lucien said the mages would hold them off, and I don't know for how long, but I don't see anyone." Keron checked the mountain behind them for any sign of the evil wizards. Gasten's henchmen would take Fale if they had the chance, and they weren't averse to hurting her if it got them the location of the machine.

"Better get moving though, just in case," Keron said.

"Won't the horses get tired if we keep going?" Fale mused.

"When we find the river, we'll give them a break." Keron stroked the neck of his stallion.

The other three nodded in response. They were reeling from the morning's attack. Keron took the lead, and Fale followed in front of Izzy, then Lisle. The sun rose higher and its rays were warming Fale in the crisp spring mountain air. It wasn't long before she let her mind drift as she swayed with the cadence of her ride.

Fale felt responsible for the fight at the mages' estate. She had wondered, in the back of her mind, if the wizards would come while they were there. Her thoughts were heavy as she remembered her dream from last night. It was the same dream she'd had for days now. The one on the battlefield.

The implications of Fale's complicated origins haunted and overwhelmed her. She had lived many lives as Princess Effailya. She could have lived a hundred lives, but she didn't want to be anyone but herself. Just Fale. She shook her head to clear her thoughts. Tapping her heels to her white mount, aptly named Snowdrop, she docilely followed Keron's horse, Courageous. Izzy and Lisle spoke softly at the rear. Keron proved to be a natural in the saddle and he was the only one after several hours at a walking pace who didn't complain of aching in his legs and back.

"My legs are falling off at the hip," Fale said about eleven o'clock.

"This saddle kills my butt," Izzy rubbed her offended flesh.

"I think my back is broken," Lisle added, mimicking her.

"You guys are pathetic," Keron shook his head.

"How do you know where you're going?" Fale clicked her tongue and urged her horse up next to Keron's when they came upon a level bit of ground. Traveling single file was so boring. The wounds left by his breakup remained fresh. However, after the trauma of the mage fight, her need to be with him was instinctual. Keron's job as the Wardsman was to protect her and that assurance gravitated her towards his protective presence.

"I have a compass," Keron explained, showing her. "I keep pointing us northwest and we should come right down the side of the mountain closest to the coast."

"Did you know how to use that before we came here?" she asked.

"No, the mages showed me how this morning," he said. "There're a lot of tools we need

that I didn't know about."

"You make a good Wardsman," she chuckled nervously. "Being a guard and wilderness guide comes naturally to you."

"Is that a compliment?" Keron's brows rose.

"Don't get a big head. Or I'll go ride with Lisle and Izzy." He laughed at her teasing. "When are we stopping for lunch?" she asked.

"In about an hour," he said, looking back. "Think you can make it?"

"Yes, but my poor horse probably needs water more than I do."

"I'll look for a place to stop. We aren't too far from the river. About five minutes or so," Keron explained.

"I'll tell the others." Fale held back to let Lisle and Izzy know the plan.

"Oh, thank the stars," Izzy said. "I need to get off this animal."

"I'm with Izzy," Lisle sighed, swaying side to side against the motion of the horse.

"Try moving with the horse, not against him," Fale laughed. "You're going to get saddle blisters."

"I think I already have them," Lisle winced, "and I don't want you to heal them, either." He added the last part before she could offer.

Izzy laughed loudly. "I would love to soak in a hot bath," she said. "Why can't your gift be to produce hot water? Maybe you'll get that one soon, if I'm lucky."

"I have a feeling I'm done receiving gifts," Fale said.

"Why?" Lisle cocked his head in wonder.

Fale looked at Keron's back. "No reason, just a feeling."

She could never tell Lisle how intimate the process of making magic was. She was aware Keron knew she needed him to protect her through the process; and he knew that he was keeping her from growing in her powers by not bonding with her and the Ondah. They both knew she still needed him, but he'd placed a barrier between them. For what? To clear her head-- or maybe his? Whatever the reason had been, now it just seemed like torture.

After half an hour, Keron decided to give the horses a thorough rest and turned their party toward the river. They soon stopped and got down from their mounts. Izzy's legs barely held her, and Lisle gave her a hand. He turned to help Fale.

"I've got it." She jumped down by herself.

The northern face of the mountain was green and alive with butterflies in fields of grass. Fale had never seen anything so lovely in the midday sunshine. They were in a sparsely wooded area near the river and enormous rocks jutted from the water and the surrounding riverbed. Keron searched for some relatively flat stones upon which to perch. He brought the horses to water, then took their leads and tethered them nearby so they could graze and rest in the dappled sunlight.

Fale and Izzy unpacked a picnic lunch the mages had prepared for them that morning with sandwiches, fresh fruit, leftover carrot salad, and cookies. “The mages have been so generous,” Fale said when they were all seated.

“Yeah, you’d think *they* were your people or something.” Izzy said.

“They are her people, Iz.” Lisle munched on his sandwich, “Mmm. This is good.”

“How so?” Keron asked.

“To the ones who know the truth, the people are still divided. They are either loyal to the source wizard or to the queen. Fale is the rightful heir to the throne and she is queen of the mages. Remember, she is a mage.”

“I keep forgetting,” Izzy said.

“How do you forget this?” Fale shot a two-foot-tall purple flame out of her palm.

“Watch it with that.” Izzy put her hands up to shield her face, laughing. “Well, at least we don’t need a fire starter.”

After eating, they refilled their canteens, adding a couple drops of iodine tincture. They were tending the horses when Fale heard a faint drumming noise. “Does anybody hear that?”

The others got quiet. Keron’s brow was wrinkled in concentration. “I think I hear something,” he said.

“It sounds like...” Izzy could hear it now too. It seemed like it was getting louder.

“I hear horses coming,” Fale said. “Everybody hide!”

They pulled their mounts into the shade, hoping whoever it was would pass them. At least they could ambush the followers if they weren’t friendly. But who else would be following them? The hooves thundered down the hill. Fale caught a glimpse of the riders through the trees.

“I see four of them,” she whispered.

Fale felt her brow perspire as the intruder’s horses slowed to a trot. She held tight to her horse’s bridle and unsheathed her sword quietly. Keron did the same, but his scabbard made an unmistakable ringing sound. The followers’ horses stopped, and they turned toward the river.

“Get ready, guys,” Fale whispered. “Are they wizards?”

“I can’t tell,” Izzy answered.

Four horsemen entered the trees and the leader signaled with his hand for the others to follow him. Fale wondered what their purpose was. Capture? Death? Maybe to follow them to the machine. She heard Lisle gasp as the men came into view in the clearing where they had been having lunch.

The lead man, dressed in black, sighed as he looked around. “Lisle. Come out. I know you’re here.”

Lisle crashed from the bushes holding his glowing amulet, anger twisting his features.

“You betrayed me,” he yelled, pointing the amulet toward the man.

The man shook his head and held up his hands. “You don’t understand, Lisle. When the

Source Wizard tells you to do something, you *never* say no.”

“You were my mentor. I trusted you with my secrets and you told them, you *must* have.”

The man moved forward and Fale stepped out of the trees with her sword pointed toward him. “Stay where you are.”

Keron and Izzy joined them.

“Hold on. I’m not here to hurt you. I came to warn you. They will send trackers, spies, mercenaries. You are too easily tracked. I’m not against you, Lisle. Not all wizards hate the mages, but we are bound by our allegiance to the Source Wizard. I have chosen my side, but I wanted to help you.”

“By following me?” Lisle’s hands were in fists, his eyebrows pulled together.

The man exhaled in frustration. “No. I told you, I am here to warn you.”

“How do we move without being tracked?” Keron lowered his sword.

“First of all, you cannot take the paths down the mountain, they are too well known. You need to go north down the mountain. They won’t expect it. The river splits above the mages’ place. Find the other river and take your horses through the water as long as you can, to throw off your scent.”

“Are they bringing attack dogs or something?” Izzy’s worried voice shook.

“No,” the man said. “But there are spells to enhance the olfactory sense for tracking.”

“What if they follow you?” Lisle asked.

“We’ll tell them this is where we lost your scent.”

“Thank you,” Lisle said quietly to his mentor.

The man tipped his head. “Just be careful. You need to go now. It won’t be too long before we gather a search party.”

Keron put his sword away and gathered his leads.

“Good luck, Lisle,” the man said softly, pulling his horse’s head around.

Lisle waved as they left the clearing. “I can’t wish you the same.”

“Let’s go,” Keron commanded pulling himself into the saddle and grasping his horse’s reigns. Courageous nickered at him. “Easy, fella.” He reached up to firmly pat the horse’s neck.

Izzy got one foot in her stirrup and couldn’t get any further, so Fale gave her a push up and over.

“Thanks,” Izzy breathed.

“Just pay me back sometime.” Fale panted, watching Izzy frown.

Putting her own left foot in her stirrup, she swung her right leg over Snowdrop’s back. Fale’s horse made the same welcoming sound Keron’s had, so Fale patted her neck.

“Thank you for carrying me,” she whispered, and Snowdrop nodded her large head, whinnying, her mane fluttering out behind her.

Fale was already in love with her mare. "I wish we could keep them," she said to Keron, stroking Snowdrop's coat.

"Where would we keep a horse in Alloy City? And how free would they be, Fale?" Keron asked.

"I know," she said. "It was only a dream."

Keron felt bad. Again. It was like he couldn't even talk to her now. This had to stop. As soon as they were alone, they would talk. He had to come to an understanding with her; she would put her faith in him, and he would guard her, and things would go back to the way they were. If they were lovers, so what? He could still do his job. Keron smiled to himself and coaxed Courageous forward.

They splashed into the water, the horses' hooves clacking against the rocky shore. They rode in silence for at least an hour. The river was still slow and shallow this high up the mountain.

"Do you think we're safe yet?" Fale rode next to Keron.

"Don't think we're going to be safe until we get on that ship." He glanced over at Fale to see the wind pick up strands of her perfectly white hair and lift them like clouds against the blue sky. "Don't you think?"

"I do," she agreed, smiling tentatively at him. Keron looked into her olive-gold eyes, slightly squinted from the sun, and thought about telling her right now that he regretted his decision, but he would want to kiss her when he told her.

"Hey up there," Izzy shouted from twenty feet behind them. "Watch where you're going."

"The horse doesn't need me to help him walk the river, Iz." Keron yelled back to her.

"Well, you're definitely spoiling *my* view." Lisle said not loud enough for Keron to fully hear. "Izzy would you go switch places with Fale?"

"You want her all to yourself, eh?" Izzy taunted.

"Something like that. I need to talk to her. Please, Iz."

"Oh, all right. I like her myself, but sometimes I wonder why you two can't get over her." She kicked her horse into a trot.

Fale waited for Lisle to catch up with her.

"You wanted to talk to me?" Fale asked.

"I wanted to see how you're doing with the whole 'break up' and how he's treating you. I want you to know you have someone to talk to," Lisle said.

"Thank you." Fale kept pace with him silently for a minute. "I'm not as strong as I want to be. I think he may realize his mistake, but for his sake, I need to keep things the way they are. He was right; he does his job well. Better than I thought he could, and he doesn't need me as a distraction.

"And as far as I'm concerned, I can't trust him anymore. Not with my heart. I'll trust him with my life, but he's broken my heart twice and I don't have enough pieces left to break. After



losing my parents, Nelson, my home, my identity, I feel like I'm barely hanging on and I want to cling to something. It just can't be Keron, and I want it to be, so badly. I know if I'm alone with him, I'll surrender. Don't let me be alone with him. Can you help me?"

"Invariably, Fale."

"That means every time, right?" she asked.

"Yes, it means always," he said looking in her eyes.

She cleared her throat. "Lisle, you know, I never answered you." He looked at her and sighed. "I don't really want you to, Fale. Just be my best friend with Izzy and we'll sort out the rest." She opened her mouth to argue, her brow wrinkled, and he continued. "I know you love me, okay? Just not like Keron. More like a brother." He looked crest-fallen, but Fale's forehead smoothed out and she smiled at him kindly.

"Yes, Lisle, I do. And if we weren't riding, I'd kiss your cheek to show you."

"Damn. Raincheck?"

"No rainchecks."

"Double damn." He replied.

"You've been spending too much time with Izzy." Fale laughed at his use of Izzy's current catchphrase.

"I know," he lamented. "You keep leaving me with her."

"I'm sorry. I'll try to be a better friend to you both, but that means you'll have to spend some time with Keron."

"Or alone."

"Oh, come on. You'd rather be alone than be with Keron?" she asked.

"Sometimes? Yes. The fool is not easy to swallow."

"Not when you call each other names. I wish you wouldn't do that," she said. "I know you do it behind my back all the time."

"How did you know?" Lisle asked.

"Because you just admitted to it." She laughed.

Her laugh was like a favorite song to Lisle, he could hear it over and over. He joined her and earned himself a suspicious stare from Keron. So, he returned his attention to Fale.

"You caught me," he smiled.

"You're both handsome, intelligent men," she said. "You're no threat to each other. At least not in my eyes. I love you both."

The sun began its descent, sending their shadows sprawling behind them. The water was too cold for the horses to stay in for long, so they alternated walking in the river and on the bank. Keron turned the band of friends towards the north side of the water into the trees to make camp.

When they had dismounted and tied the horses, Keron said, "Hey Lisle, can you pitch the tents while I chop some wood for a fire?"

"Sure," Lisle sounded less than enthused.

"What do I do?" Fale asked.

"Can you get the water? There's a cooking pot on my saddle and refill the canteens."

"Izzy, you come help me figure out these tents," Lisle said.

"How many are there?" Izzy asked.

Keron retrieved the axe from his saddle and handed the cooking pot to Fale, "There's one on my saddle and one on Lisle's."

"Looks like I'm stuck with you, Lisle." Izzy said.

"Actually, I was thinking of bunking with Lisle tonight." Fale said lightly.

"What?" Izzy asked.

"What did you say?" Keron echoed.

Fale looked helplessly at Lisle.

"Fale and I were going to...talk." Lisle said, trying to think of a convincing reason not to leave her alone with Keron as per her request.

"That's it," Izzy said, throwing down the tent pegs in her hand and stomping. "Somebody had better tell me what is going on, right now, and don't you dare say 'nothing' Fale Valine!"

"Oh boy, I'm going to chop wood." Keron picked up his axe and sauntered to the nearest fallen tree, checking the wood for dryness.

Fale sighed. "We broke up, Izzy."

"What? When? I thought you were getting married." Izzy looked like she might cry. "I mean, you're technically married already, but I thought..."

"It happened the night before we left the house."

"But you guys have been fine-" Izzy began, then cringed. "You haven't been fine at all, have you?" She looked at Fale who was shaking her head sadly. Izzy moved to hug her, then stopped.

"Wait. Lisle knew, didn't he? Did you tell him Fale?" Izzy's temper flared.

"Yes," Fale said quietly.

"Why am I always the last to know, huh, Fale?" Izzy shouted as Keron thwacked the log. "You know, if you cared so much for me, you'd think of me now and then."

"Iz." Fale tried to hug her.

"No. Not this time. I need time to chill out. I need to think." She pushed Fale away and walked off. "Sorry Lisle."

Keron's axe continued to rise and fall, chopping off a huge dead limb. Fale watched him

work, his stainless-valetzsan arm taking the brunt of the work, doing a better job than an ordinary man. Valetzsan alloy was the strongest metal on the planet, giving him super-human strength in his right arm and leg. His shirt was off. Fale could see every muscle in his shoulders and back ripple as he lifted and swung. His mechanical parts blended almost seamlessly with his form. He was stunning, man and machine, and he used to be hers.

“Fale,” Lisle said. “Don’t do that to yourself.”

She turned to him in the orange-pink light of the setting sun, her eyes glistening, and he caught his breath.

“I’ll get the water,” she said despondently. “Thanks, Lisle. For everything.”

He watched her go and called to Keron, “Hey roughneck, why don’t you go talk to the poor girl. She’s feeling alone.”

Keron looked up, surprised. “What happened? What did you do this time, egghead?”

“I didn’t do anything, Izzy pushed her away.”

“Why didn’t you go after her?” Keron tossed his axe into the tree.

“I don’t have enough light left to figure out these tents if I do,” Lisle said. “Plus, I’m not who she wants to see.”

“Where did she go?” Keron asked, wiping his face with his t-shirt and putting it back on. Lisle pointed East and Keron set out walking. He went to the rocky riverbank and didn’t see Fale anywhere. “Fale? Where are you?”

Hearing nothing but the whisper-roar of rushing water, Keron continued upstream until he saw a flat rock bathed softly in sun. Her hair was pink, reflecting the red sunset, and she spilled more tears than the water she filled. She believed she was truly alone, and it was partially his fault. He was about to go to her when movement in the shadows caught his attention. A great animal was advancing cautiously toward Fale. On all fours it stood as tall as Keron, and it was covered with patches of black and silver fur. It was an emaciated bear-like creature. They were said to eat people on this mountain because of the food shortage. Keron walked to the tree line and inched his way to Fale.

When she was only a few feet away, Keron stepped onto the bank and said, “Fale, turn around very slowly.”

Surprised by Keron, Fale jumped and shrieked.

“Keron, what are you doing?” Her eyes widened and he watched her gaze travel above his head. He turned around to see the hungry creature on two legs bellow at them. Fale moved toward Keron and clutched the back of his shirt. “What do we do?”

“I don’t know; they can run fast, so don’t run. What about your fire?”

Fale made a shaky flame. The animal’s ears, which were cocked forward, lay down flat. It huffed at them. Keron stood in front of her with his valetzsan arm out.

“Fale, shoot your fire in his direction; see if he runs.”

She obeyed. The bear circled to their right on all fours, grunting his displeasure. The animal ran full-tilt at Keron and swiped at him with its paw. Claws gouged his left shoulder, but he bore his weight on his valezsan leg and barely remained upright, though he took several steps. His shoulder felt wet and he noticed the long marks through his torn shirt.

“Keron,” Fale said. He looked up at the bear, swinging its head from side to side, clacking its teeth, and put his hands up again. This time it hit Keron on his right side and he flew like a rag doll. Fale watched in terror as the bear went straight for Keron’s limp body, lying face down.

It bit his valezsan leg and Fale heard a ‘clink’ noise which seemed to frustrate the bear. Thank the stars, valezsan was as strong as nano-tech steel and it didn’t budge. The creature bit him again with no luck, but when Keron moved, Fale was horrified to see the bear’s jaws aim for his neck. Fale shot her fire at the bear and it turned to the top of Keron’s head and sank its teeth into his scalp. Fale screamed and ran at the bear, she turned herself invisible and screamed as high and loud as she could in the bear’s ear.

The bear began to drag Keron, so Fale shot her flame across its muzzle. It dropped Keron and ran back into the forest. Fale flopped onto the ground and pulled his head into her lap. She held up one hand with fire to see in the fading light and ran her other palm over his injuries.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have gone so far.” She cried tears of regret.

“No, you shouldn’t have.” He smiled weakly.

She smiled back at him. “Did you break anything? I fixed what I can see.”

“Man, if you keep healing me, I’m not gonna have any good scars to show my grandchildren.”

“You never told me you wanted grandchildren,” she said, sniffing and swiping at her eyes.

“Well, babies come first,” he said, reaching up to tuck her hair behind her ear. “Fale—”

“I think I know what you’re going to say,” she stroked his face.

“Yeah?” He pulled her mouth towards his.

“Yeah,” she whispered.

“Hey!” Lisle came running up to Fale and she dropped Keron’s head back into her lap. “What happened? I heard your scream all the way back at camp.” He panted.

“Great timing, nerd,” Keron grumbled.

“Why are you covered in blood?” Lisle looked up and down Keron’s body, searching for the injury.

“We met a monster-like bear.” Fale gestured to the trees.

“No way. What happened?”

“Walk us back and I’ll tell you,” Fale said. She gathered the water containers and made Lisle put an arm around Keron’s shoulders.

“Do it and I’ll punch you.” Keron warned.

“She told me to, stupid. It’s not like I want to.” Lisle countered.

“I’m fine, but thanks, needle-brain.”

As they returned to camp in the dwindling light, Fale relayed what she called “the creature story” and Lisle told her something he considered “the tent experience.” Izzy had gathered food and was sorting out supper in the dark.

“It’s about time you guys came back.” She sneered, “For two people broken up, you sure spend a lot of time alone together.”

“Keron was attacked by a bear, Izzy,” Lisle scolded.

“Oh my stars, are you okay? Are you hurt?” Izzy jumped up. “Fale, make your fire thingy.”

Fale produced a flame in her palm and watched Izzy fawn over Keron. Of course, he ate up the attention. Izzy sat him down and searched him for injuries Fale might have missed. Fale was steamed. She opened her mouth and Lisle whispered into her ear, “You’ll only make it worse. Let’s make a campfire and cook supper.”

“Okay,” Fale’s shoulders drooped.

They carried over the logs Keron had cut. There were eight, so they gathered leaves and twigs for kindling, dug a small pit, then stacked the wood like a cone, placing a ring of stones and dirt around the periphery. The fire would burn through the night. Finally, Fale lit the twigs and tinder with her flame, keeping a steady jealous green flame going until the fire was crackling and popping.

“We may have to cut another few logs,” Lisle said to Fale. In the distance, they heard Izzy laugh at Keron.

“I think I can do it,” Fale fumed.

“Don’t hurt yourself,” Lisle said.

“I have muscle. Speaking of which…” She poked him in the chest. “Where did these muscles come from, Lisle, huh? Have you been chopping wood?” He turned pink. “Lookin’ good.” She winked at him and strolled to the fallen tree.

Fale found the limb where Keron had left off and swung with all her might. The axe bit deep and she had to put her foot on the log to yank it out, wiggling back and forth. She slid her hand up to the axe head and swung again, pulling back as it made contact at a forty-five-degree angle. Then pulled up on the handle to do it over again. And again. Fale was concentrating so hard on what she was doing, she jumped when she felt a hand on her shoulder.

“Dinner’s ready.”

“Thanks, Lisle. I guess I’m done anyway. We won’t use more than twelve logs tonight and we don’t have room to take them with us,” she said.

“Probably not.”

“Are they eating?” she asked softly, hearing Izzy talking and laughing.

“Yep.”

“I’m going clean up instead. I’m all sweaty and sore from riding all day, using my powers and chopping wood.”

“Fale, you need to eat, too,” Lisle said.

“Oh, I will, I’m starving. I just want to clean up first.” She motioned to herself.

“Fine, but if I hear screaming, I’m coming after you.” His smile in the dark was illuminating.

“Thanks Lisle.”

“I’ll wait for you,” he said. “To eat, I mean.”

“I know.” She smiled.

Fale found her duffel bag by the unsaddled horses, who were nickering to one another, and dug through it to find a pair of loose pants and a stretchy top to sleep in. She found soap and a washcloth, partly by firelight and partly by moonlight. She was far enough away not to have to see Keron enjoying Izzy’s witty repartee, but close enough to hear his chuckle, and imagine his dimple.

“Enough,” she whispered to herself as she walked to the river. “I am stronger than this. Takanori don’t wallow, we master.”

The water was icy on her skin. Fale could barely stand to wash her hands, let alone her face and body, but as she wiped off each part of her with the washcloth, she started to feel normal again. She decided to leave her hair for tomorrow and even dipped her swollen feet in the rushing water, knowing she could warm them by the fire. Fale dressed in her clean clothes and listened to the silence of the night; Izzy and Keron must be done eating.

When she got back to the camp, Lisle sat at the fire, gazing into its depths, yellow flames reflected in his eyes.

“You look tired, Lisle,” she said quietly.

“Keron said we leave at dawn again,” he yawned. “They’ve gone to bed.” He pointed a thumb over his shoulder at the tent behind him.

Fale had said she wanted to stay with Lisle, but she had expected a fight. One that hadn’t come. Maybe she’d been wrong in assuming she knew what he was going to say earlier.

Were they sleeping separately in there?

She mentally shook herself. “What’s for dinner?”

They ate a meat dish Fale was not familiar with in curry spices, and the few fresh vegetables the mages had sent with them. Lisle said, “Let’s clean up quick and get to bed. Tomorrow night I say we trick them into letting us cook and eat first, then we’ll go to bed and they’ll have to stay up late doing dishes.”

Fale laughed, “Is that what happened, they tricked us?” she whispered.

“Absolutely. It was a ploy to get more sleep,” he said.

She smothered a laugh. “You’re outlandish.”

“Me? You’re considering much more nefarious deeds taking place in there, my friend,” he wiggled his eyebrows at her as he dunked dishes in the pot of soapy water and wiped them off.

Keron lay inside his sleeping bag, his left arm behind his head and his cheek on his bicep. He ached everywhere from the long day of travel. He had no idea riding a horse used so many muscle groups. He didn’t know how Izzy was standing. Maybe that explained some of her behavior tonight. He couldn’t show weakness though, not as the protector. Some guard he’d been tonight, though. Fale had saved him...and he’d almost kissed her.

She’d slapped him last time and told him the next kiss better mean forever. He hadn’t forgotten. But freaking Lisle interrupted them. That guy had uncanny timing. Keron could hear her outside laughing and whispering to him. What could possibly be that funny? Soon they went to bed. Keron waited until he heard their tent zipper and heard them quietly talking in the night.

He couldn’t understand what was being said, but the tone of Fale’s voice was loving and full of mischief. He heard her yawn and laugh at something Lisle said. Keron could imagine them in the same sleeping bags, opened up and zipped to each other. He wanted to tear the tents down and claim his wife, his girl, his love. Tomorrow. He’d tell her how he felt tomorrow.

Want to finish the book?

Purchase **THE QUEEN’S HEART** here:

[www.amazon.com/dp/B07XWTH6ZB](http://www.amazon.com/dp/B07XWTH6ZB)

\*Don’t forget, if you enjoyed this book, to leave me a review. Then, when you send me your address, you can receive free author swag if you live in the continental US. Leave your review at: [www.amazon.com/dp/B07XWVSH2B](http://www.amazon.com/dp/B07XWVSH2B)

Then email me at: [haskin.author@gmail.com](mailto:haskin.author@gmail.com)