

Freedom Fight Trilogy Book Two

When the
journey demands
too high a price,
will she give up?

THE
QUEEN'S
HEART

J e n n i f e r H a s k i n

The Queen's Heart

Freedom Fight Trilogy #2

By Jennifer Haskin

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.

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Dedicated to my Huckleberry

Maybe one day he'll read it.

Pfft.

And Mrs. Walliser- "Wall- eye- Sir. Get it right"

Who let me do soap box reports for every book I read in the fourth grade.

(There were a lot.)

Freedom Fight Trilogy

Book One: *The Key of F* (2018) www.amazon.com/dp/B079P7DMQ4

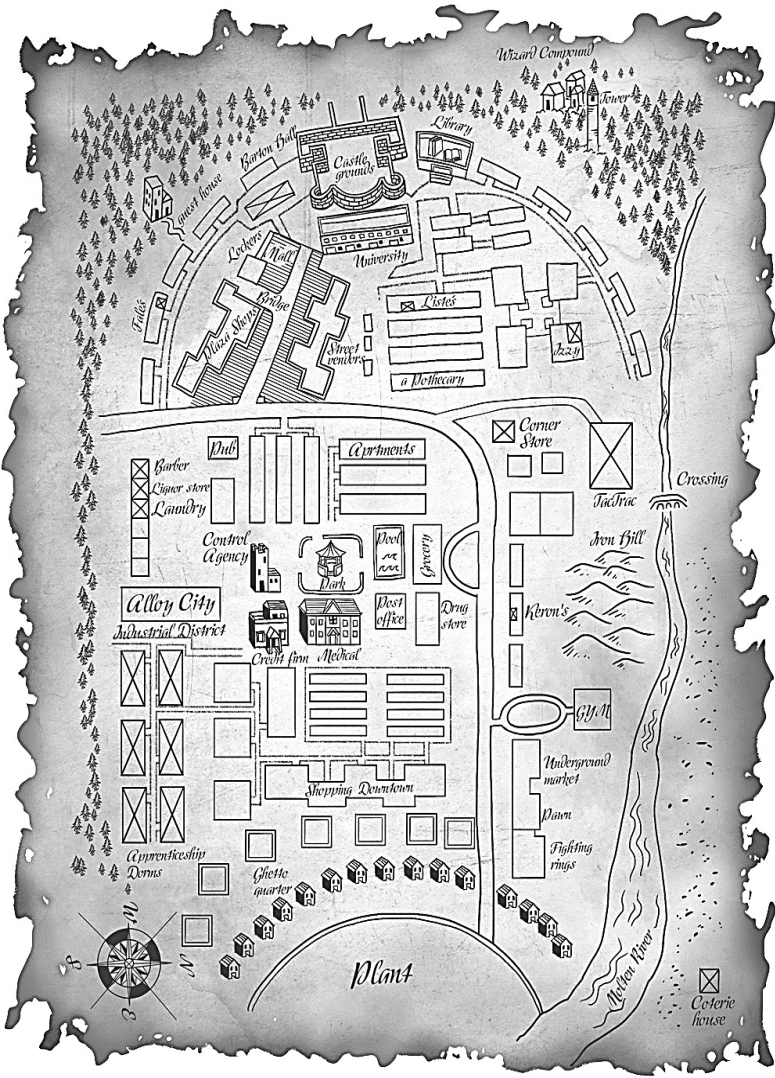
*Official Book Trailer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P4hGpwX3Xng> Book

Two: *The Queen's Heart* (2019) www.amazon.com/dp/B07SZBPPB25

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

Map of Algea





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 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-valezsan arm taking the brunt of the work, doing a better job than an ordinary man. Valezsan 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 go 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 valezsan 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 its 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.

Chapter 2

Fale smelled coffee. She raised her head to look at her watch; six o'clock. The sun would be rising in minutes. She rolled out of her sleeping bag and woke up Lisle.

"Rise and shine," she sang to him.

"Ugh, I hate cheerful people in the morning." Lisle covered his shaggy mop of blonde hair with his pillow.

"Oh, get up." She pulled his pillow away. "Who's gonna win this game? Them or us?"

"When you put it that way..." Lisle jumped up. "He's already up, isn't he?"

"I smell coffee," she said.

"Let's see who's packed first." Lisle looked like a little boy. "You roll the beds and I'll pack this tent."

"Yes, sir."

Fale's laugh drifted to the campfire. Keron had not slept well. Every breaking branch was an alert to a potential wild attack. He was feeling the pressure of being a guard, but not for everyone, for Fale. How could he guard her from places he couldn't see? It had been so much easier when she communicated with him- Lisle let her do whatever she wanted. Keron heard her laugh again. He was going to have a bad day. And if Izzy chattered on and on, he would have to force himself not to gag her. It was the only reason he hadn't woken her yet, but golden rays were piercing the black sky and turning it white-blue. Keron used a stick to stir up the fire and went to wake up Izzy and take down his tent.

By the time he was done packing the tent, Fale and Lisle were sitting at the fire smugly eating instant oatmeal with their coffee. "What's got you two looking so pleased with yourselves?" he asked.

"No reason," Fale said smiling. Izzy made a rude snort of disbelief. She obviously had not chilled out yet.

"Izzy," Lisle said sternly. "Get over it." Izzy picked up a bowl for her breakfast.

Keron chuckled. "When will you two be ready?"

"We are ready," Fale smiled prettily.

"You're packed?" He looked at her outfit of denims, t-shirt and sweater, like yesterday. "Did you need your toothbrush?"

"Nope."

"Your tent—"

"Everything's packed, master dictator." Lisle interrupted. "You just have to help load the

horses with your robot body.”

Keron tensed.

“Lisle,” Fale warned.

“What? Biomechanical is too long to say.”

“Well think of something else, Keron is not a robot.” Fale chastised.

“Sorry, man.” Lisle had a look in his eye that showed sincere regret for what he said. Though he and Keron were rivals of a sort, Fale knew he didn’t want to demean or dehumanize anyone no matter what.

“No problem. Some people call them bichanic appendages,” Keron suggested.

“I didn’t know that,” Izzy said. “It’s so interesting. You know, we hardly ever get a chance to talk. You’ll have to tell me more about your bichanic arm and leg once we leave.”

Fale rolled her eyes. Izzy obviously thought the whole problem was Fale. She sighed and Lisle put his hand on her knee to lend support.

“Let’s load the horses then, bookworm.” Keron said to Lisle.

Fale sighed. “I give up.”

Izzy was silent as she tossed the rest of her breakfast into the fire and followed the men.

They had cleared camp and were starting down the mountain again when Fale said, “You know, when I was healing Keron yesterday, something occurred to me.”

“Did you have a vision?” Keron asked.

“No, but when I had the last one, the wizards must have seen it.” Fale said.

“So, you think they know where the machine is, too?” Lisle prodded.

“Yeah.” She nodded.

“Don’t worry, Fale. They don’t know about Everligné.” Lisle brought his horse even with hers.

“I have a bad feeling about it.”

“Trust her on this, Lisle.” Keron said.

“But what can we do about it now?” Izzy asked.

“Nothing,” Fale absently chewed a fingernail.

“Then let’s drop it.” Izzy said.

“Okay.” Fale looked at her best friend’s back. When had Izzy become such a nightmare? They had spent their lives being inseparable. She would have to talk to Izzy later to get to the bottom of this; there had to be more to this than a break-up.

They rode most of the day without incident, stopping for the horses, to have lunch, and to refill the canteens. In the late afternoon they came to a narrow pass with a sharply rising

overhang.

“Should we try to go down the hill?” Fale asked.

“It looks too steep.” Keron answered.

The thin path was their only option, so Keron elected to go across alone. Courageous picked his way across the rocky gap carefully, and Keron waved from the other side. Next, Izzy slowly rode the passage. They waved to Fale.

“You go ahead,” she told Lisle, “I’ll bring up the rear.”

“Okay. Here I go,” he breathed. Lisle clicked his tongue to his teeth and urged his mount forward nervously. He didn’t like heights much more than Fale did.

Keron watched Fale hang back and realized his mistake too late. He should have tied a rope to Fale’s horse, with her fear of heights, she was never going to be able to cross on her own.

Lisle was shaking halfway across the ledge when his horse stopped. He gave it a little nudge, but it didn’t move. So, he kicked back with his foot; still nothing.

“Come on, Shadow.”

“Lisle! Are you okay?” Izzy cupped her mouth and yelled.

The sound of rumbling could be heard and the bluff shook.

“Lisle, move!” Keron boomed.

The earth fell on top of Lisle and his horse. The whole overhang seemed to slide down the hill. It was rolling over itself and falling like chocolate milk bubbles in a child’s glass.

“No.” Fale, thinking only of Lisle, prodded her horse across the now loose and thick muddy pass to Izzy in half the time. Keron was already looking for a pathway down the steep hill. Fale ignored him and plunged headlong down the incline, leaning back as far into her saddle as she could.

“I’m coming, Lisle,” she called. “Where are you?” Fale reached the bottom of the slope and searched for Lisle, sobbing his name and digging through damp soil. She found him trapped under rocks half as tall as she was. Up the mountain, Keron led Izzy’s horse along the hillside.

She tried to lift the boulders to no avail. “I can’t lift it, Lisle.”

“Use your power,” he gasped like a fish out of water.

Fale wrung her hands and frantically thought through her gifts. Her thoughts evaded her, and she paced before the stone, pulling on her hair, trying not to panic. She relaxed and felt for the magic. Her eyes closed and electric tingles shot down her arm like laser beams. She reached out...and disintegrated the rock.

Fale knelt, “What’s broken?”

“Both...my legs. I...don’t know about...inside, it’s...hard to breathe.” Bruises bloomed all over his body. “Is...my horse...alive?”

Fale checked Shadow and came back. “I think he’s badly injured.”

“Can you heal us...both?”

“I’ll do my best. I don’t know how much internal damage either one of you has,” she said helplessly.

“Have Keron...take...me over...to Shadow...and heal us...together then. I can’t...walk...to the coast.” Lisle said between diminutive breaths.

“But he’s—”

“He’s coming.” Lisle rasped, looking past her at Keron dismounting and running to them.

“What do I do?” Keron asked.

“Carry Lisle over to Shadow’s belly.” Fale directed. “Careful, his legs are broken.”

Keron slowly picked up Lisle, but he screamed in pain and blacked out. Keron laid him gently on the ground, and Fale ran her hands over him and the horse. She healed them at the same time from head to foot. Kneeling between them, she leaned each way to slowly ‘feel’ for internal injuries. Fale took her time. Lisle woke with a scream when she touched his broken bones. It took her several minutes to go over each part of his body and Lisle lay still.

Lisle peered into Fale’s olive-gold eyes and said sincerely, “Thank you...Fale.”

“You’d do the same for me,” she said weakly, her eyes drooping.

“Invariably,” he smiled. She returned the gesture.

“Is he better?” Izzy asked. She stood by, wringing her hands while Fale and Lisle were on the ground, covered in mud. Lisle’s horse suddenly stood up.

“I guess they are,” Keron said.

“Now I have to get up, too. Thanks a lot,” Lisle said to his horse. Izzy laughed but Fale remained strangely silent. Her arms hung limply, and her hands dragged on the ground. Lisle sat up.

“Keron, something’s wrong with Fale.”

“Fale?” Keron leaned down, “Do you need help?”

She didn’t respond.

“I think the healing was too much,” Lisle said, fearing he’d hurt her. “She is a beginner.”

“She healed Keron, she’ll be fine.” Izzy said.

Both men looked at her in astonishment. “I am one person and I had minor external injuries, Iz. Give her a break.” Keron rebuked.

Izzy crossed her chest with her arms. “You guys make such a fuss sometimes, that’s all. Don’t we need to make camp soon?”

“Yeah. It looks like we’re at the bottom of the mountain. Let’s find the river and get a fire going.” Keron took one of Fale’s hands and said in her ear, “Stand up, sweetheart.”

Fale would have given anything to hear him say it again.

He lifted her arm. “Fale, come on.” She stood slowly, letting him pull her up. She took one

step and her legs buckled. Keron couldn't catch her in time and Fale crumpled in the mud. He picked her up and carried her to his horse, setting her body in the saddle. She gripped the leather, slumping over the horn. He swung up behind and under her, essentially putting her on his lap, her legs on top of his. Keron knew Fale wasn't well when she didn't fight him. He wrapped one arm around her middle and took the reins with the other.

"Lisle, can you lead Fale's horse?" he asked.

"No problem," Lisle called.

They rode for another ten minutes before they found a place to camp.

"Can you hang on while I get down?" Keron asked Fale softly. She pulled on the horn and leaned forward so he could scoot out from underneath her, then she sat back, letting her body lean to the side.

"Geez, Fale. Hold on. I'll help you, don't fall out of the saddle." Keron reached up to take her under the arms and guide her to the ground, where she landed in a heap.

"I suppose that's as good a place as any to lie down," Keron said, taking his pillow from the horse and placing it under Fale's head. "I'll be right back." She lay there watching the canopy of leaves twinkle as the breeze caught one leaf at a time and turned it over to shine in the evening sun. She listened to the song of each little bird who flew by, searching for a mate this time of year. Never before had she felt exhaustion like this. It went bone deep. Fale closed her eyes and let herself float into sleep.

The next thing Fale knew, she was being carried through the fire-lit darkness to a tent. Keron laid her on an open sleeping bag.

"I have hot water. You're all muddy."

She stared at him.

"I thought you'd like to clean up before you put your pajamas on." He held them up along with a towel and washcloth. She looked at the pot with longing in her eyes, as she sat up halfway and reached toward it with a limp hand. The campfire grew brighter outside.

"How did you make the fire?" she slurred.

"We have matches, Fale." He rolled his eyes. "Not everything requires magic."

She reached for the rag and dunked it in the water, but she couldn't seem to wring it out without dropping it.

"You can go eat." She tried to smile at him. "Thank you for the water."

"You can't do it, can you?"

"No."

"Do you want me to get Izzy?"

"Not today," she said, swatting away a bug.

Keron chuckled. "I'm not offering to get Lisle. Can I help?"

“I guess so,” she said warily. “As long as you stay Wardsmanly.”

“Wardsmanly?” He raised an eyebrow and she smiled.

Keron helped her wash up and change into her pajamas. Fale sighed and lay back. “Is there mud in my hair?”

“Yep.” He said. “I’ll get us something to eat and heat some more water.”

Fale woke to Keron adding his pillow to hers. “Here, sit up.” He put a hand behind her back.

“You ate,” she accused, seeing his empty bowl.

“You were sleeping; I didn’t want to wake you.”

“You were watching me sleep again, weren’t you? You know that’s creepy, right?” she smiled sadly at him. Keron set the bowl in her lap. “Lisle cooked?” she guessed.

“Yes, he’s feeling much better. How’d you know?”

“Lisle only knows how to make one thing.”

“Spaghetti,” they said together. It was bland--just pasta, tomato sauce, dried onion, garlic, salt and sausage. Fale ate it all anyway, she was starving.

“Anything else?” she asked.

Keron chuckled. “Hungry?”

“Yeah,” she turned a rosy pink.

“We might have more.” He took her bowl but returned with more hot water and a sleeve of cookies. “Lisle and Izzy were hungry, too. So, we get dessert.” His blue eyes twinkled in the dancing shadows of the tent as he split the sleeve into two halves and gave one to her.

“Izzy loves cookies, too. You’re not helping my cause; but I’ll eat them anyway.” She smiled genuinely.

“That’s my girl.”

“Keron, I’m not your girl anymore.” She lost her appetite.

“Fale—” he began.

“Can we wash my hair now?”

“Why won’t you let me talk to you?” he asked.

“When I’m clean I’ll listen,” she sighed.

Keron helped Fale break up the mud caked in her hair, and he washed it twice, massaging her scalp and rinsing it outside with the hot water.

“Feel better?” he wrapped her head in a faded peach towel.

“Much,” she smiled at him and munched on a cookie. “Thanks. You know, I think I’m going to get some sleep, Keron.” She yawned dramatically.

“Fine,” he said. “I guess we could all use some sleep. Goodnight Fale.” Keron got up and

took the food and cooking pot out of the tent.

A little while later, Fale's tentmate stuck his leg through the flap. "Lisle you wouldn't believe how close—" But it was black hair that peeked through the opening. Keron came in and started to zip up the tent. "What are you doing?"

"Going to bed," he pointed to the other sleeping bag, which he proceeded to scoot into, then he pulled his shirt over his head and off with one hand. His biceps flexed and he stretched languidly.

Fale swallowed several times to combat her dry mouth.

"Where's Lisle?" she demanded.

"He's staying with Izzy from now on." Keron smiled to himself.

"Why?" She tried to cross her arms to prove her indignance but ended up feeling like a child, so she laid her hands in her lap.

"Three reasons." He ticked off three fingers. "I can't protect you when I can't see you. Izzy makes me nuts after riding all day. And Lisle."

"Lisle what?" she tucked her chin and glared up at him.

He chuckled, "I have my reasons."

"Well I'm going to sleep." She turned away from him.

"Nice try, Fale," Keron said. "You can't stop me forever. We need to talk."

"I don't," she said brightly.

"So, you're happy?" he asked.

She swung her head to look at him. "That's not fair."

"Don't you love me anymore?"

"How dare you ask me that," she seethed.

"Why can't it work, Fale?" he asked. "We're strong enough together to make it happen."

"But I'm not strong enough to survive you; I can't lose you one more time. What if you aren't sure and you leave again? I can't take that chance. Especially right now. People are counting on me for their lives. I have to find this machine and my happiness is not as important as the mission."

Keron got up and knelt in front of her. He wiped the tears that spilled silently down her sun-kissed cheeks. "Your happiness is important."

"Maybe by the time I can put myself first, I'll be able to trust you again."

Keron looked wounded. "You don't trust me?"

Fale ran her nails through the hair above his ear. "Only with my every breath; but with my heart? No, I can't. And it kills me every day."

"I'll respect your decision if you make me a promise; no, two promises." He looked at her pert nose and tiny freckles; he wanted to kiss each one. Keron let his head hang back.

“What promises?” She was drawn to the column of his throat, his neck corded with muscle. She wanted to kiss him there, run her fingers down to his chest. She wanted to lay her head there and soak in his strength.

“One is that you keep talking to me, let me earn your trust. And two: no kissing Lisle,” he said.

“Lisle? But I don’t—”

“No. Kissing. Lisle,” he said. “Or all bets are off.”

“Fine. No problem.” She yawned for real.

Keron pulled the sleeping bag over her shoulders and kissed her forehead. “Goodnight Sprout,” he whispered in her ear.

“Go to bed,” she said gruffly, and smiled to herself in the dark.

Fale rose in the chilly morning to a faint buzzing. At first, she thought it was an insect, but realized it came from Keron’s watch. No wonder he was up so early; he had a vibrating alarm. He closed his mouth and opened his eyes. The blue light of morning showed his silhouette clearly.

Fale averted her eyes as he sat up and stretched. She could stare at his body all day long, better not to tempt herself. She watched him run his hands through his hair to tame it.

“You know that’s creepy, right?” he teased her.

“It’s totally dark in here,” she pulled up her sleeping bag.

“I can feel you watching me,” he said.

“You cannot.”

“No, but you stopped making that cute little snore as soon as you woke up,” he said.

“That doesn’t mean I’m watching you,” she said defensively.

“Then I apologize.” He chuckled.

“Never mind. Where is my bag? Do you know?” she asked.

“I’ll get it. Want coffee first?”

“No, I’m cold.” Fale said.

Keron slipped his shirt on and got out of the sleeping bag, putting on his socks and boots. He leaned over and touched her forehead.

“You’re hot, Fale,” he felt her face and neck. “I think you have a fever.”

“I feel fine,” she shivered.

“It makes me crazy that you can do what you do and yet neither one of us can heal you when you need it,” he said when she lay her burning cheek into his cool palm.

“C-can you just get my clothes?”

“Give me a minute.” He hurried out of the tent and came back with her small duffel. He set it before her and rolled up his sleeping bag while she pulled out her denims and a clean shirt.

“Why don’t you wear something comfortable?” he suggested. She put the denims back and got out thick cotton pants with a drawstring. “We should have gotten you a hat, too; your face is all red.”

She laughed. “Have you seen yourself? I guess not. Look at your arms. I have no idea why you aren’t freckled everywhere like I am.”

“Genetics? I wouldn’t know. Do you need help?”

“I think I can manage. You go make coffee,” she said.

Crickets chirped loudly as Fale struggled with her clothing. She lacked her normal strength and dropped most of what she picked up. She finally managed to change on her own, which felt like a great accomplishment. Her bedroll ready, she brought out her belongings to dump in the pile near the saddles. She petted Snowdrop on the nose and the horse huffed at her.

“Hi girl.” Fale stroked the animal’s jaw and patted her neck. Snowdrop nodded her head and blew air at Fale some more. She got the feeling she was making her horse nervous, so she went back to the fire.

Keron was taking down the tent as their coffee percolated. She walked up to the flames with her hands out. The heat made her shiver again. Fale could hear Lisle and Izzy talking and assumed they were getting ready and rolling up their beds. She added three and a half cups of water to the cook pot and set it on the coals. Keron brought their tent over to the luggage pile and came to the fire just as the water boiled. Fale dumped four packets of instant oatmeal in the pot and took it off the flames, stirring the mix together. Lisle and Izzy unzipped their tent and joined them.

“Yay. Oatmeal,” Izzy sneered and twirled her finger in the air.

“We have raisins and honey you can add, if you want,” offered Fale.

“No, thank you,” Izzy said distastefully. Fale was trying, but Izzy was starting to irritate her. Izzy passed her to sit by Keron like a long-lost friend. They had known each other longer, after all. Fale remembered what he’d said last night about Izzy’s chatter and didn’t feel as bad. At least Izzy wasn’t just getting on her nerves alone.

Keron poured coffee for everyone and Fale dished out oatmeal into bowls. Then she sat next to Lisle and sipped her coffee, holding it in both hands and blowing on the steam. She shivered again.

“Are you cold?” Lisle asked.

“Yes,” she said. “Keron says I have a fever.”

Lisle held the back of his hand to her forehead. “You’re burning up, Fale.”

“So, I hear, but I’m cold,” she said.

“Come here,” he held an arm out and Fale snuggled into his side. Lisle put his arm around her, rubbing her back and arm briskly. Fale looked at Keron’s perturbed expression beseechingly.

After a few minutes of Izzy's non-stop chattering, Keron just looked annoyed. They finished breakfast and each helped to break down camp.

"Can we camp early tonight to wash some of the clothes? Mine are all muddy and Lisle's bag was soaked," Fale asked Keron while they stood by the trees near the horses.

"I suppose. If we make good time."

"We can make lunch in half the time," she said.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

"Strange," she admitted. "Weak and vulnerable. I don't like it. I'm still recovering from the healing."

"I didn't know it would hit you so hard. I'm sorry."

"We know now," she said. "But it doesn't do us much good, it's not like I could leave Lisle like that. I would have done it anyway."

"I know," he said. "We'll stop early tonight. Maybe you can rest."

Izzy walked up. "You're still not better?"

"I'm getting there, Iz," Fale said.

"You won't slow us down, will you? I'm ready to get this machine and go home." Izzy put a hand on her hip.

Fale felt defeated, she'd thought Izzy would be with her to the end, but it didn't look that way now. "No, I won't slow anyone down."

"Good." Izzy was turning to walk away.

"Izzy, can we talk?" Fale asked.

"I'm going to get the horses," Keron said, giving the girls privacy.

"About what?" Izzy asked skeptically.

"About why you're really so angry with me."

Izzy shifted from one foot to the other and looked around. She rubbed the bridge of her nose and blew out a resigned sigh. "You really want to hear this?"

"Yes," Fale said.

"Simple. It's not fair. I'm the one who hates Alloy City and wants to get out. I want to travel. I'm the exciting one. You're the boring one. Yet you have two guys you don't deserve in love with you, and you dance around like they don't exist. And who decided that you get to be a princess? You don't appreciate it at all. You have this great power and this cool background and all you want to be is *Fale*? Wall-flower Fale? You're so self-absorbed. Let's just say, I would be doing things totally differently if it were me. And why are we out here risking our lives for you? So we can be in your court? What does that make me- your jester? I don't think so. All you think of is yourself."

"I do not, Izzy. I'm thinking of the people in Garrith." Fale said.

“When was the last time you thought of me? Did something for me, or Lisle, or for Keron-who thinks he must give up his whole life to love you? He’s technically stuck with you now *for the rest of his life*, unless he can get the mages to give him a new wristband. Or a divorce,” Izzy said.

“I’m sorry, Iz. You’re right. I haven’t asked you what you want. I- I didn’t know you felt this way. What *do* you want?” Fale asked.

“To go home, but I said I’d do this, and I will. I mean, how do you expect me not to be conflicted? I’ve never liked Control, but if they’re bad, then that makes my parents evil, or maybe they knew about the machines and did nothing? I won’t be able to go back to them once this is all over- you winning this battle will condemn my family.”

“Izzy, I don’t think-”

“I watched you cheer when the mages yelled that they want Control punished. What do you plan to do with my parents if you take over? I joined this mission for you and for Nelson, but I should have thought more about myself. And speaking of what I want, I want to have someone treat me like Keron does,” Izzy said.

“Like he treats me, or the way he treats you?” Fale asked nervously.

“The way he treats everyone, Fale, if you’d noticed.”

“How can I fix this, Iz?”

“Just stay out of my way,” Izzy said.

“So that’s it? We’re over?” Fale asked.

“I’ve had enough. I can’t see myself under you as a ruler. I need a Fale- free life for a while, then we can see. But for now, I’m stuck with you out here, so leave me alone.” Izzy said.

“I’m really sorry, Izzy.”

“You apologize a lot Fale, but you never change,” she said.

Fale bowed her head, not knowing what to say. Maybe Izzy didn’t like the way Fale was changing.

“Maybe I should take what you don’t want.” Izzy turned her back on Fale and left to mount her horse, Lightning. She took off at a trot, going the way they had come.

“Where did Izzy go?” Keron led Fale’s mare over to her.

“I have no idea,” she said. “You’d better go find her.”

Keron swung into his saddle and kicked his horse into a canter. Fale pulled herself up onto Snowdrop and joined Lisle.

“Should we wait here or go after them?” she asked.

“No sense in backtracking. Let’s follow,” Lisle proposed. So, they walked their horses in the direction Keron had taken.

Fale and Lisle emerged from the trees into a clearing where they saw Keron hugging a sobbing Izzy. Fale’s mouth went dry. Lisle looked at her. “I’m sure it’s nothing.”

“I know,” Fale said woodenly; but she had to wonder if Keron treated everyone the way he treated Izzy.

Keron repeatedly patted Izzy’s back while she clung to his shoulder. Lisle and Fale rode up to them, and Lisle cleared his throat. “Is everything okay?” he asked.

“Fine,” Keron said. “Fale just had a talk with Izzy.” Keron looked disapprovingly at Fale. Shocked, Fale’s mouth fell open.

“I’m okay now. Let’s go,” said Izzy.

“Are you sure?” Keron bent to look at her face.

“Yes,” she sniffed.

“Okay,” he helped her up and re-mounted Courageous. “Let’s go.”

Chapter 3

The four of them set out, Keron and Izzy in front, and Lisle with Fale comprising the back of their emotionally charged party. Fale had imagined this so much differently. The day of travel progressed quickly. They entered a dense, hot and humid forest. Each sense engaged with the brand-new environment. As it turned out, the other side of the mountains were rich with life, dripping with green moss. It was all foreign to them. The scent of plant matter steamed up from the ground and filled Fale's nose. Unfamiliar sounds all around them were loud, and close, grunting and chittering.

"What was that?" Fale asked Lisle.

"A bird? I think?" he guessed. A long armed, furred animal swung by them.

"What was *that*?" Fale asked again.

"A monkey," Lisle recognized it this time. "But I don't know what kind."

They heard croaking, chirping, and roaring. Fale tensed and looked around. She saw brightly colored feathers peeking out from between green branches and huge insects on even bigger leaves. Snowdrop, reacting to Fale, walked a skittish pace. They saw and heard things they'd only ever learned of in books. They passed around snack mix for lunch and kept riding, picking their way through hanging vines and pushing aside heavy branches.

"Watch out for spider bites and other poisonous things," Keron warned.

"Wow, that was scientific," Lisle said.

"Not everyone here is a geek," Keron called back.

"No, some of you are savages," Lisle said. "I thought we were camping early."

"I'm looking for water, geek."

"Didn't they pack you a map? Look at that." Lisle suggested.

"Yeah. If I knew where we were on the map, that would help," Keron said.

"Oh, yeah," Lisle edged his horse closer to Keron's. "We could at least see where the river goes."

The two men got out the map and followed the river down the mountain to where they had crossed early that morning. "It snakes around us," Lisle said. "We should run into it soon and it looks like we can almost follow it to the coast."

"Good job, dork."

"My pleasure, heathen."

Fale shook her head. They obviously enjoyed insulting each other. "Let's hurry then, before we lose the light," she said, slapping a mosquito on her neck. "There's not much down here to begin with."

About three o'clock they heard a rumbling that got louder and louder. The temperature

dropped several degrees. Fale could smell the water in the air. As they exited the trees, the river came into view. It was tumbling over itself and rushing for the ocean with mad passion.

They dismounted and looked for a dry place to make camp. As most things were damp, it took Keron almost an hour to find suitable firewood, another thirty minutes to prepare the kindling and another thirty to get the tinder bundle caught aflame. Lisle set up the tents and Izzy took care of the horses, then they canvased the area for poisonous snakes and insects. Fale gathered her laundry along with Keron's and the soap to wash at the river side. She found a small eddy that would work well for her purpose and entered the water up to her knees.

It was Izzy's turn to cook so she began meal preparations. Lisle joined Fale at the water with his and Izzy's clothes. Once clean, Fale squeezed as much water out of the clothing and towels as possible and hung them everywhere, mostly on the cords holding the tents down and on a few low-lying bushes.

The breeze was steady, so she thought they should be dry by morning. If not, she would have to pack them damp and rehang them the next night. With nothing else to do, Fale looked in her large duffel bag and saw her long and short swords. The sun set early in the jungle and the light was fading in the clearing by the river when Fale started to train with her blades.

She planted her feet and brought her long sword swiftly from her hip out and up in a graceful arc, finishing her imaginary opponent with her short sword in a stab to the gut. Fale spun around and thrust her blade down to counter her opponent's weapon, then twisted her upper body, circling her weapons in a figure eight, making vertical slashes at her opponent's body. She attacked, blocked, slashed and pierced.

"Ha!" she yelled. She spun the blades in her hands and thrust forward with her short sword, the long one held high above her head to make a double strike. She sheathed her weapons and bowed. The men had stopped what they were doing and were watching Fale in the flickering firelight.

Izzy rolled her eyes. "Show off," she muttered.

"Izzy, what is your problem?" asked Lisle, who stood near her.

"Fale," she answered.

"What has she done to you?" he asked.

"What has she done *for* me?" she postured.

"I don't know what your deal is but get over it. Fale is not only a good person, she was chosen to be the mages' liberator."

"Not likely. And you only say that because you're in love with her. It's not a secret."

"You're just mean, Izzy," he said.

"Shut up, Lisle."

Keron approached Fale. "Why don't you wear your swords?"

"I hadn't really thought about it," she said. "I guess since I couldn't in Alloy City, it never occurred to me, but that's why I brought them, huh?" She smiled up at him. The firelight danced along his features, throwing shadows in his cheeks and jaw. She itched to touch him.

“Yeah,” he said, staring back at her like he wanted to say something. She waited and he tucked her hair behind her ear. He opened his mouth to speak.

“Dinner’s ready,” Izzy called to them.

Fale sighed.

Izzy had made a sort of pizza with crispbread, seasoned tomato sauce, hard cheese and sausage cut like pepperoni.

“There had better be cookies left, too, or you guys are gonna die,” Izzy smiled at Keron.

“There are,” he smiled back.

Fale tried to think of something that would make Izzy as jealous as she felt, but nothing would come to her, so she sat by the fire silently. Lisle knew though.

“Hey, what were you guys doing in there that you were too busy to eat the cookies? I thought that’s why you took them?” he asked Keron, winking at Fale. Izzy gave him a dirty look.

“Talking,” Keron said in a dry tone. Izzy touched his arm.

“Here’s your pizza.” She served him, waving her hand over the cheesy bread to keep the insects away.

“Thanks, Iz.”

They ate in silence.

“I’m going to bed,” Fale announced. “Which tent is mine?” she asked Keron.

“The blue one,” he said.

“Goodnight, Lisle,” she said and climbed into the blue tent.

Once in her sleeping bag, Fale listened to Izzy’s voice brighten and become talkative.

It sounded like they were having a party. The men laughed with Izzy and Fale covered her head. She wanted to scream. Couldn’t they see what game Izzy was playing? She was going to steal everything that Fale had left. It was time for Fale to fight back. Maybe it was time for a little seduction...

She was almost asleep when Keron crept in. “Did I wake you?” he asked.

“No, I wasn’t asleep yet.”

“You’ve been in here a long time,” his voice was curious.

“You guys were loud.”

“Sorry,” he said. “Izzy’s really funny.”

“Yeah.”

“What’s up with you, Fale? Why would you treat her like you did this morning?” he asked.

“Me?”

“Yeah, she’s had a really hard day.”

“Oh sure. With all your attention,” Fale said.

“She said you told her to stay away from me. I can’t just ignore Izzy because you want me to, Fale. That’s childish,” he reprimanded.

“She said-? I never- Keron, that’s not what happened at all,” Fale said.

“So, you’re saying she’s a liar?” Keron raised his brow at her.

“This is not going well,” she said. “What else did she say?”

“You were there, Fale,” Keron was exasperated.

“Humor me.”

“She told me you don’t want her here and she’s homesick, but you were only concerned about the machine. And she said you told her to stay away from Lisle and me, because I’m... yours.”

“I never said those things,” Fale pleaded. “You have to believe me.”

“Izzy had no reason to lie to me when I found her crying this morning,” he said. “And you can be a little too direct when you’re feeling territorial.”

“So, you believe her and not me?” Fale asked.

“It’s not like I want to, Fale. It just is. I’ve known her longer than you and she’s not a liar. Give her space,” he directed.

“That’s what *she* told *me*,” Fale sputtered.

“Good. Do it, then.” He began to take off his clothes. “Would you turn around or something?”

“Since when do you mind if I see you?” she asked.

“Since you see me as a possession you have, but don’t want,” he answered.

“Keron, I was going to change that tonight.”

“I think you’re a little late. I don’t want you to want me just because you’re jealous, anyway.”

“Oh. My. Stars. I can’t believe this day. Go ahead and get changed, I’m leaving.”

“Where do you think you’re going?”

“I’m taking a walk,” she said.

“Not where I can’t see you,” he retorted.

“Then I’ll sit by the fire,” she seethed.

“Fine.”

“Fine.”

Lisle and Izzy had gone to bed and Fale was glad. She didn’t think she could suffer the indignity of looking at Izzy’s face after that conversation. Izzy had done what she planned and

planted a wedge between Fale and Keron.

Fale sat by the fire, sweating and listening to the water churn. The river called to her. Her own stink was about to over-power her senses. The idea of fresh water pulled her to her feet. Fale listened at the tents, and hearing no voices, she picked up one of the clean towels and found the eddy.

She didn't care if Keron got mad. She hadn't gone for a walk, and he never said she couldn't swim. She laid her towel over a fallen log and quietly disrobed, dashing to the water. Fale only went as deep as she had before and sat.

She really hoped there were no leeches in the water. She was already covered in mosquito bites and tiny red bumps dotted her waistband, ankles, and any place tight enough for a little bug to burrow. She shivered. Thinking of the snakes and insects she saw daily, was creeping her out.

She leaned back and got her hair wet, wishing she had some shampoo. She soaked a while, watching the moon above and feeling the sand beneath her. Small curious fish darted toward her and away. She held out her fingers to see how close they would come.

"Looks like we had the same idea," Lisle stood on the shore in his shorts with a towel. Fale hugged her knees.

"You can't see me, can you?"

"No."

"Did you bring shampoo?" she asked.

"And soap," he answered, looking over his shoulder. "Does Keron know you're out here?"

"He thinks I'm by the fire. I'm sure he's asleep by now, though."

"Can I come in?" Lisle asked.

"Can you leave your shorts on?" she asked.

"Yeah," he grinned at her.

"Sorry."

"No big deal," he said, wading to sit several feet in front of her. "Here's the shampoo."

She took the small bottle from him and turned around. He could see her in the moonlight, bare to the waist, her long white hair hanging down her back. He watched, mesmerized as she washed her hair and dunked her head under the water to rinse the soap away. She rose from the surface face first and he thought she might be the most amazing thing he'd ever seen. He didn't think he could bear to give her the soap, to see her skin covered in slick bubbles. His mouth went dry.

She dipped into the water to just below her shoulders and turned back around. "Thanks, Lisle."

"You're welcome," his voice came out raspy.

Fale laughed, "You sound different."

"I haven't heard you laugh all day."

“It’s been an awful day, Lisle,” she said. Fale relayed her conversations with Izzy and with Keron.

“Hmmm. What’s your plan?” he asked.

“I don’t know what to do.” She pulled on her hair.

“Should we make him jealous?” Lisle winked at her.

Fale laughed. “I can’t do that to you for two reasons. One, I care about how you feel; and two, Keron is not the good kind of jealous,” she said. “Besides, he may not care at all, and I can’t handle that.”

“Let me know if you change your mind.”

“It’s a sweet offer, Lisle, but I’m not sure it’s totally innocent.” She laughed at him.

Lisle laughed with her. “You might be right.”

Keron came out of the tent. “Fale, you need to get some sleep.” He looked to the campfire. “Where are you guys? I can hear you two laughing.”

“Over here,” Fale called sheepishly. She waved at him from the water.

He looked irritated. “Come on, you’ve been up long enough.”

“You aren’t her boss,” Lisle barked. Keron’s face was flushing.

Fale knew Keron’s jealousy when she saw it. “It’s okay, Lisle. I’m coming, Keron,” she said.

Keron stood planted on the beach with his hands on his hips. “Well?” he asked.

“Could you turn around?” she asked. Lisle obediently gave her his back.

“Why?” Keron narrowed his eyes.

Fale crossed her arms and slowly rose until the water came to her hips.

“You’re naked?” he asked incredulously. “With Lisle?”

“Not *with* Lisle. I came out—” Fale tried to explain.

“I don’t think I want to hear this,” Keron said. “Just get out.” He turned around and Fale ran for her towel.

She grabbed her pajamas and left for the tent, “Sorry Lisle,” she called.

“You say sorry to him?” Keron fumed.

“You’re an idiot, Keron,” Lisle said.

“Shut up, Lisle.”

Fale woke to the buzz of Keron’s watch, but she didn’t roll over. She’d gone to bed last night with cold, wet hair, barely getting dressed by the time Keron barged into the tent. They hadn’t spoken. He watched her to make sure she got into her sleeping bag and he fell asleep still facing her. She felt like a criminal under surveillance.

Fale didn't feel like getting up. She didn't even feel like fighting anymore, but she knew she must. She felt conquered, as if she'd already lost the war and two of her best friends. She thought of losing her parents and was tempted to wallow in her sorrow, but then she thought of Nelson, who'd taught her to fight. He'd want her to stand until she fell; she missed him. He'd want her to get up and face the day head-on. The least she could do was go through the motions.

Fale left Keron stirring and put coffee on the fire. She collected the laundry and folded it, shaking out the ants. Lisle and Izzy got up and moved about camp. Izzy started on breakfast and Lisle took their tent down. Keron exited their tent with both bedrolls and his bag.

"Wait," Fale said. "I have your clean clothes."

"Thanks," he took them from her.

Fale put her own clothing away and changed into denims and a t-shirt. She would sweat, but she needed the denims for her saddle to keep from chafing. She chose a longer sleeved t-shirt, too, to guard against insects. Then she grabbed her swords to put on outside.

"Are you done in there? I want to take the tent down." Keron said.

She stepped out. "Please don't be mad at me all day. I like it better when we're friends."

Keron took a deep breath. "I said not to fool around with Lisle."

"You said no kissing Lisle," She smiled at him tentatively.

He shook his head and smiled back. "Damn it, Fale. I was going to stay angry this time."

"Please don't."

"Give me one good reason why not."

"I need you," she said sincerely.

"Fale," he sighed.

"I'm really sorry," she promised.

"Okay," he sighed again and shook his head. Then he grinned at her. "Go eat breakfast."

Fale nearly skipped to the fire. Izzy had prepared crispbread with peanut butter and jam, or honey.

"You look chipper this morning." Lisle said.

"Things worked out," Fale said cryptically.

"I'm glad," he said, chewing his crispbread.

"Me, too."

Keron finally joined them at the fire and Fale poured him coffee. "What are those two smiling at?" he asked Izzy.

"Beats me," she said irritably. "I made you breakfast." She handed him a bowl of crispbread with peanut butter and jam.

"Thank you." He took it politely.

Fale ducked her head so that no one could see her smile. She knew he liked honey better.

“Will we be in this jungle the rest of the way?” Fale asked Keron.

“It looks like it from the map.”

“You’re such a good guide,” Izzy put a hand on Keron’s knee.

“Thanks, Iz,” he looked at her hand.

“Any time,” she cooed. Fale peeked at Lisle and rolled her eyes.

They had breaking down camp to a science. Keron loaded the horses, Fale put out the fire, Izzy packed the food and last-minute items and Lisle checked everything twice, getting trash and helping where needed. They were riding within half an hour after finishing breakfast. The morning dragged on hot and sticky, the humidity was new to the group. Alloy City was higher in elevation and much drier. It felt like breathing under water.

Fale rode next to Lisle, trying to catch the branches Izzy sent flying backwards to thwack her in the face. They talked about Lisle’s classes at the University and the ones Fale had left for good, until it was time to stop for lunch. Keron halted them at noon to water the horses and stretch their own legs. Fale left her friends to find a place to relieve herself.

“Lunch is ready,” Lisle called. They sat to eat beef jerky, hard cheese and some dried fruit with nuts. Izzy ate hungrily.

“Where’s Fale?” Keron asked.

“She probably wandered off- she’ll come back,” Izzy said. “Don’t worry about her.”

“It’s my job, Iz,” Keron said, rising.

“She’s probably just trying to get your attention,” Izzy put a hand on his arm to stay him.

“Fale alone is usually a bad idea,” Keron pulled his arm from her and walked away.

“What are you smiling at, Lisle?” Izzy asked.

“Nothing,” he sang.

Keron searched the surrounding area until he found Fale lying in a heap. Her clothes were all askew.

“Fale.” Keron knelt and fixed Fale’s shirt, zipping her denims, then picked her up. He carried her back to the others.

“Lisle,” he called. “Pull that tarp out and lay it flat.”

“Why?” Izzy asked. Keron approached with Fale. “Oh,” Izzy pouted.

Lisle laid down the tarp. “Is she injured?”

“I don’t know yet, Lisle. I just found her.” Keron lay Fale down and checked her for broken bones from her feet up, stopping at her hair. “She hit the back of her head. There’s a bump and it’s sticky. Roll her that way.” He looked at the back of Fale’s skull. The blood was easy to find in her white hair, and her scalp had a split an inch or two in length.

“Stitches?” Lisle asked.

“She hates that,” Keron winced. “Let’s hold pressure to it first.”

“Great. How long will we have to wait here? ‘Til she wakes up? What if it takes all day?” Izzy packed food and water into her gear.

“Stop it, Iz. We’ll stay as long as it takes,” Lisle said.

Keron half listened to their banter while he applied pressure to Fale’s wound. After twenty minutes there was no change. “I’d better do this while she’s out, Lisle. Izzy, can you get me the med kit?”

“Sure,” she said sweetly, hopping up to find the kit. She returned and handed it to him.

“Lisle, hold her hair?” Keron asked. He poured alcohol over the abrasion and the needle to clean them, then pulled her skin together and pressed the curved needle into her scalp. Six stitches later and Keron pulled the line tight, knotting and cutting it close to her head.

“There.” He pulled all the hair out of the way. “Now she needs to wake up.”

Lisle had just asked Keron if they should make camp when Fale’s eyes fluttered.

“She’s coming to,” Lisle said. “Fale?”

“Lisle? Where’s Keron?” Fale was still on her side.

“Right here,” Keron’s rich voice came from behind her. “Did you have another vision?”

“Help me up, please? My head hurts.” She reached to the back of her skull.

“Don’t do that.” Lisle lifted her into a sitting position.

“Why?”

“Keron gave you stitches,” Izzy volunteered.

Keron frowned. “What did you see?”

“The Sage spoke to me inside a vision,” she said. “The wizards took Lucien’s daughter. She was shopping in the plaza. They made her send a telepathic message to her father for us: they want to trade Nelson for the location of the machine.”

“That didn’t take very long to say,” Izzy said.

“I had to answer,” Fale replied.

“What did you say?” Keron asked.

“I had to say no. The machine is too important to too many lives. My family comes second.”

“What about Lucien’s daughter?” Izzy accused. “You sacrificed her.”

“Lucien went himself with some others to give my answer. They are her best chance. Do you really think they would’ve let her go anyway? Who knows what she’s seen or heard,” Fale explained.

“True,” Lisle said.

“Lisle, we have to get Taran to look in the dungeon immediately,” she said. “Tell him I’ll come back tomorrow to see what he found.”

“Alright. How’s your head? Are you dizzy at all?” he asked.

“I’m okay.”

“Good. You sure you want to do this now?” he asked, and she nodded. “Let me get my book.”

“What’s happening?” Izzy asked.

“You get to watch me switch places with a boy in Garrith. It’s kind of two-way astral projection,” Fale said.

“What does she mean?” Izzy asked Lisle.

He returned with his book. “You’ll see,” he winked at Fale, who sat back against a tree.

“Ouch,” her head touched the bark.

Keron threw an arm around her shoulders, “Lean back on my arm instead. It’s softer.”

“Not by much,” she laughed.

“Close your eyes,” Lisle directed, and began his spell.

Fale relaxed and let go, she felt her arms, legs and head floating as Lisle chanted the spell, but the last weight lay in her chest. She breathed deeply, letting herself sink into the relaxation. Fale felt her body shiver and hum and flew into Taran with a rush as if a cord tied him to her. She blinked her eyes, stumbling on her walk.

“Whoa. You okay, Taran?” It was the boy from dinner the other night.

“Where are we going right now?” she asked, not having the patience to blend in that day.

“Supper. You got heat stroke or somethin’?”

“No. I was thinking. Tonight’s the night,” she said conspiratorially.

“Tonight?” the boy repeated.

“Yeah. Is there a reason why not?”

“Nah. We been waitin’ for ya,” he said.

“Good. Let the others know for me, will ya?” she asked. “We’ll have to be quick; in and out. Just a look and see. No rescues, and no telling Minova.”

“She could really help if’n she’d tell the guards to let us in and shut up...” the boy moaned.

Fale hadn’t thought of that. “Remind me of that later, like in an hour, okay?”

“Okay?” he responded, looking confused.

She’d have to let Taran make that call, he knew his sister better than anyone. “Well, go tell everyone and meet me back at supper,” she directed.

“Sometimes you talk real funny, Taran,” the boy said, “like now.”

“I’ve been practicing my fancy talk,” Fale said lamely. “Go.”

When he was gone, Fale quickly ducked between huts looking for Minova to send her back. She found the girl with two wooden bowls and spoons, looking for her.

“There you are,” she said. “Hey Minova, how are you?”

“Fale?” she whispered.

“How’d you know it was me?”

“The way you speak,” Minova said quietly.

“Is it so different?” Fale asked.

“Taran learned from our father. He was from a clan native to Garrith. They have a different brogue. He passed while my mum was expecting me. I learned from her, she was a granddaughter of the Queen,” Minova said with pride. “I’m a duchess.”

“A granddaughter?” Fale asked.

“Many great- great’s, I think. I’m not sure I remember how many. It doesn’t matter anymore. If you’re in the royal family, the guards are worse, so we all pretend to be like everyone else.”

“I’m sorry, Minova. I really do hope we can be friends after all of this, but there are truths you may not like. Right now, we are on a journey to find the machine, and we’ve just begun so be patient with me, but I will tell you everything when I can,” Fale said.

“I can wait,” Minova stood up straight.

“You are so responsible, Minova. How old are you?” Fale asked.

“I’m thirteen and Taran’s almost eighteen.” Fale was shocked. She’d thought them both just children.

“Do you have a mirror?” Fale asked.

“A small one that was my mother’s,” Minova answered, pointing Fale to a hut three doors back the way she’d come. They ducked inside and stopped in front of a wooden chest with tooled leather straps and beautiful chip carving on the panels. Minova opened it and pulled out a bundle. She unwrapped a compact from a piece of black chamois and handed it to Fale.

Fale looked at the face in the mirror. Brown hair waved around her head to her ears, cut short underneath, kissed with soft blonde streaks. She stared into great blue-green eyes with lashes that were unfairly long and thick. Taran’s nose was crooked a bit at the bridge like it had been broken before, but it straightened out to perfection. His face was tanned, but not overly freckled, and his jaw was sharp. She admired her reflection.

“Ugh,” Minova said. “You think he’s handsome, too. That’s gross. I was hoping you were different.”

“Oh,” Fale closed the compact, remembering what she was there for, and flushed. “Sorry, Minova.”

“It’s okay. All the pretty girls think they’re good enough for him,” Minova took back the compact as Fale offered it.

“But they aren’t?” Fale needed to go back, but she was strangely interested.

“Not for Taran. I bet you’re pretty, aren’t you?”

Fale was uncomfortable with the turn of the conversation. “I don’t look like myself right now, I’m in hiding. But my father said I was.”

“That counts, I guess. I never had a father,” Minova said.

“I really need to get back now, Minova.”

“Who sends you here?” she asked.

“My friend Lisle helps, but he says it’s my gift,” Fale answered.

“I was thinking, if you came on your own, you should be able to send yourself back.”

“Really?” Fale wondered.

“Why don’t you try it? If it doesn’t work, I’ll send you,” Minova said.

Fale sat and repeated her relaxation process, she tensed muscles and relaxed them, then imagined her body flexing without physically moving. When she began to feel light and floaty, Fale pictured her own body and squeezed her eyes shut, praying she ended up in the right dimension.

Chapter 4

Fale opened her eyes to see the jungle surrounding her.

“I did it,” she said.

“Did what?” asked Keron next to her.

“I came back on my own.”

“Fale?” He looked into her eyes.

“That is just so weird,” Izzy said.

“Does he really talk much differently than me?” she asked.

“It’s distinctive,” said Lisle.

“Not a dialect I know,” added Keron.

“Hmm,” Fale thought out loud. “I wonder if I could hear it, so I don’t sound so awkward.”

“You said you came back on your own?” Lisle asked.

“Yes, it was Minova’s idea. I just did the same thing as before,” she said.

“So, you don’t really need me anymore,” Lisle sounded unhappy.

“Of course, I do. You help a lot,” Fale assured. “Did you guys tell him everything?”

“Yep,” Keron said. “What did you do?”

“I told the guys tonight was the night. And Minova and I talked,” Fale said.

“About what?” Lisle asked.

“Taran’s family. He’s almost eighteen, did you know that? He speaks like the native people of Garrith. His father was one of them. And I saw his face,” Fale said.

“Taran’s father?” Keron asked.

“No, Taran’s. In a mirror.” Fale said.

“That’s one of the first things he asked to do,” Lisle said. “Interesting.”

“He already knows what I look like, the real me?” Fale asked.

“Yes,” Lisle looked confused. “Why does that matter?”

“Yeah?” asked Keron.

“He must be hot,” Izzy said smugly. “He said I was pretty.”

“He said you ‘was a pretty Miss,’ Izzy. That’s not a big deal,” Lisle said.

“I guess it doesn’t matter, it just surprised me because I hadn’t even thought of it yet,” Fale blushed prettily.

“He’s a hottie,” Izzy confirmed.

“Is he, Fale?” Lisle grinned and nudged her with his elbow.

“He’s not bad,” She hedged.

“Mmm hmm,” Izzy crossed her arms.

Lisle laughed, but Keron appeared irritated. “We should find a good place on the beach with a whirlpool, to make camp,” he said.

Once camp was set up, Fale went through the food containers they had brought and decided to make shepherd’s pie. Keron sat at the fire next to her and softly played his guitar. Fale smiled to herself, proud to have purchased it for him. She crumbled sausage into the pan to brown and added sauce of dried onion, soup mix, and bouillon. Then she put in a can of drained peas and covered the pot.

Izzy came over to lean on Keron’s arm. “I love guitar music. It’s so soothing. Don’t you think so, Fale?” Izzy looked up at Fale and produced a sickeningly sweet smile.

“I have my favorite songs.” Fale smiled, ignoring her. She used their other pot to prepare instant potatoes with boiling water. Keron played the first song he’d played for Fale and grinned at her.

“Remember this one, Fale?”

“How could I forget? It’s your best one.”

“It’s your favorite,” he said.

“Yep,” She smiled, tilting the second pot into the first and scooping potatoes on top of the sausage and peas mixture. She replaced the lid and added a few burning logs to the top. “Will you help me time that for forty-five minutes?” she asked Keron.

“Sure,” he strummed his strings.

“Play for me,” Izzy pleaded. Fale couldn’t listen anymore.

Keron watched Fale walk towards the tent. “Fale? Don’t you want to join us?”

“Go ahead,” she said. “I’ll be back later.”

“If you’re sure...”

“She’ll be back,” Fale heard Izzy say.

“Lisle,” Fale whispered loudly into the bushes behind the tents. She’d seen him go this way. “Where are you?”

“Are we being secretive?” He came up behind her.

“Geez, Lisle. Give a girl some warning,” she scolded. “What are you doing?”

“See this stick?” he asked.

“Duh.”

“Smart Alec. Well, I’ve got some fishing line and I’m going fishing,” he said.

She followed him. “I have several questions.”

“Shoot.”

“What will we do if someone, like me, needs stitches? Where’d you get the hook? And I’m

already making dinner, when are we going to eat said fish?" Fale asked.

"Easy," he said. "We'll re-roll the line when I'm done for stitches, I got a hook from the toolbox and we'll eat it for breakfast."

"Then you are cleaning it-- and cooking it," she replied.

"No problem," he grinned at her, tying the line through a slit in the end of the 'pole.' He added the hook and stepped to the edge of the bank, casting as far as he could. They waited as Lisle slowly pulled his line in and tried again.

"What made you decide to come out here?" Fale crossed her arms.

"It makes me feel so guilty, you know? When we talk to Taran? I am part of the people who have oppressed him. All of them. It's partly my fault."

"Of course, it isn't."

"I feel like it is. I'm deeply invested in setting these people free, Fale."

"I know, Lisle. Me too."

Keron played a few of his faster songs for Izzy and then all the ones that made him think of Fale. Where was she? It had been more than forty-five minutes, more like an hour. Keron set the instrument on his lap and looked around the camp.

"She's with Lisle," Izzy said. "They're fine."

"Yeah, I guess."

"Keron, tell me more about yourself."

"What do you want to know?" he asked warily.

"I want to know more about you. We never just *talk*," Izzy prodded. "Tell me about who you are now."

"I'm a Wardsman..." he began.

"No, tell me about your real life... as a bondsman."

"That's not my life anymore, Iz. I guess this life started the day Fale saved me in the pub," he thought out loud.

"I want to talk about just you," Izzy insisted.

Lisle and Fale strolled into view smiling and talking animatedly; Lisle was holding a fish and Fale was cradling her other hand. Lisle's fish was about a foot long and looked like a reddish catfish. Fale held her right hand, palm up.

"What happened?" Keron asked.

"Dummy here, grabbed the line." Lisle pointed at Fale with his thumb.

"I didn't know it was going to pull so hard. But admit it; you would've lost the whole pole if I hadn't." She grinned broadly.

“Possibly,” Lisle said and winked at her.

“Did you wash it off in the river?” Keron asked.

“I didn’t think I should put my bloody hand in the muddy water out there. How’s the eddy?”

“A little better. Come on.” He set his guitar down and took Fale by the shoulder.

Lisle laid the fish down next to the rocks around the fire. “Why the pouty face, Iz?”

“I swear she gets hurt on purpose.” Izzy watched Keron washing Fale’s hand in the river, checking the damages.

“Lisle, could you get dinner? I’m gonna get some gauze on her hand,” Keron called as they walked to their tent.

“Not a problem,” Lisle called back. He ignored Izzy’s grumbling and dished the shepherd’s pie into bowls for each of them.

“What do you think you’re doing with her?” Izzy asked Lisle.

“Just being a friend.”

Izzy snorted as Lisle handed her a bowl. “How can you follow her? She can’t lead an army.”

“She’s trying, Iz. She’s learning for now-- it’s all she can do.”

“Yeah, right. What is this?” She poked at the food in her bowl with her fork.

“It’s just sausage, peas and mashed potatoes. Never had it before in your upscale upbringing?” Lisle chuckled.

“Actually, no. I guess I grew up privileged, but it never seemed that way to me.”

“That’s because you focus on what you don’t have,” Lisle said.

“I know you think I’m inhuman, but I’m not. I realize my good fortune was a result of the oppression of the people in Garrith. That’s why I’m here now. It has nothing to do with Fale.”

“Well, that’s obvious.” Lisle took a heaping bite.

“Shut up, Lisle.” Izzy smiled.

Fale ate with her hand wrapped in gauze; it reminded her of days ago when Lucien had healed her. Had that been last week? Her days and nights were getting mixed up. Lisle sat cleaning his fish by the river. He was turned to the side to see by the campfire light.

“That better taste good for breakfast, Lisle, or you’re never gonna hear the end of it,” she yelled to him.

“Just wait,” he said.

Fale helped put the dishes away, since she couldn’t wash them and excused herself. “I’m going to bed, guys,” she called out.

“G’night,” Lisle shouted back.

“Night,” Izzy said.

“I’ll be there soon,” Keron looked at her over his shoulder as he plucked strings on his guitar. Izzy sat next to him on the tarp, leaned back on her elbows, humming along.

Keron ducked into the tent and swept off his shirt in one move.

“You asleep?” he asked.

“Not yet,” she yawned.

“I wanted to apologize for being a little over the top last night.” He couldn’t stand in the tent and was bent over, making his abs engage. She couldn’t help but gaze at the well-defined muscles on Keron’s washboard stomach. He held his shirt in his hands and the soft firelight made shadows swirl across his body. His denims hung low on his hips by a black leather belt.

Fale could barely squeak out her reply. “That’s okay.”

“I feel like I haven’t had time to talk to you,” he said.

“That’s because you’re always with Izzy,” she replied.

“Izzy needs somebody. She feels alone. She feels like you and Lisle are buddies now and have abandoned her.”

“That’s so far from the truth, it’s not even funny,” Fale said.

“You haven’t been running off with Lisle?” He raised his eyebrow at her. “And riding and eating with him?”

“She told me to stay out of her way; and so, did you, by the way,” she said.

“I did,” he admitted. “Listen, I don’t want to fight with you, and I don’t want you to fight with each other. Maybe some space will help.”

“Then don’t blame me for giving it to her,” Fale said. “I have feelings, too.”

“This apology didn’t come out right at all,” he said. “I’m sorry, Fale.”

She liked it better when he called her Sprout. She used to hate the nickname, but it had become a term of endearment when they were together.

“You’re forgiven.” She yawned again.

He chuckled low in his chest and Fale’s belly warmed. “Goodnight.”

“G’night. Mwah.” She made a pretend kiss at him.

“Don’t tempt me,” he warned.

“You wouldn’t.”

“Oh, wouldn’t I?” he teased, leaning over her.

“Don’t you dare.” Fale put her hands up.

Keron dove on top of her and she shrieked. He ducked his head to kiss her and she covered

her mouth with her hand, laughing hysterically. He pried one hand away to bend down and have her cover his mouth with her other hand, squealing with laughter. Then he pinned both of her hands by her ears and kissed her soft cheeks, nose, forehead and chin while she laughed.

“Get off, get off, get off.”

“Fale?” A voice outside the tent called. Keron stopped and held himself above her, gazing into her eyes.

“Yes?”

“I heard you scream. Are you okay?” She investigated Keron’s sky blue depths. “I’m just fine, Lisle. Thanks. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“You’re sure?” he asked. Keron was obviously insulted, by the tick in his jaw.

She smiled at him. “Very sure.” Keron smiled back at her.

“Okay, goodnight,” he said.

“Night Lisle.” She flexed her hands in Keron’s grip and he let them go.

“Sorry,” he said.

“I’m not,” she said. He looked at her with a questioning glance and she pulled his head next to hers and held him tightly. Keron hugged her back. She was so tiny in his arms, and he breathed in the scent of her.

“I miss this,” she whispered.

“Me too,” he pressed her to his chest. He held her as long as she needed him and when she let him go, he tucked her sleeping bag to her shoulders. “Sleep well,” he said, kissing her forehead and left her to slumber.

She dreamt of living in a large stone-walled castle. She walked down corridors with buttressed ceilings and tapestries adorning the walls next to paintings of noble men and women. She ran her fingertips over the cold stone. In her room, fresh flowers adorned a table and the scent of roses drifted in the air. Was this her life? Fale was confused. It all felt so familiar, but it wasn’t her own experience. What would life be like for her once she was queen? Would they even want her as queen when the people had a choice? She was terrified. Would the people think she was a spoiled princess? She didn’t know how to be diplomatic. She didn’t know anything about running a kingdom, leading a war, daily demands of royalty...

She didn’t believe she could do it.

The castle vanished and Fale stood on the battlefield again. Her armor was covered in a sticky film of blood. She hefted her sword and rolled her shoulder. Being queen wasn’t just fancy dresses and castle decorating, it was this. Fighting for what she believed in. And she was going to set those people free even if they never chose her. It was the right thing to do. It was her destiny.

The next morning Lisle was especially cranky, and Fale didn’t think it was because his fish burned.

“We need to make good time today,” Keron said. “We lost a couple of hours yesterday and we’ll have to contact Taran at lunch today, so we can’t afford to dawdle.”

“I’m ready, just tell me what to do,” Izzy said, “and I’m all over it.”

“Thanks, Iz,” Keron said. “Can you help Fale with the fire? Then we can go.”

“I don’t need any- Sure. Come on, Izzy,” Fale said.

Izzy followed Fale to the fire while the men loaded the horses. “Lisle said you two were, uh, active last night,” Izzy said.

“What do you want, Izzy?” Fale asked.

“Are you back together?”

“No. Happy?” Fale asked, not in the mood to be playing mind games.

“Yes,” Izzy said.

Fale stopped throwing sand on the fire. “What?” she asked.

“You heard me,” Izzy continued working.

Fale couldn’t believe she was living this bizarre scenario in the middle of the jungle and Keron was so clueless. “What are you waiting for? Why don’t you just seduce him already?”

“He needs to get away from you first, but we’re getting there, a little more every day,” Izzy said confidently.

“You’re delusional,” Fale retorted.

“You’re just jealous,” Izzy said.

“How are we coming, ladies?” Keron called, leading the horses to them.

“Great,” Izzy said.

“You’re so cheerful in the morning,” Keron remarked. Fale snorted and Keron gave her a scolding glance. Izzy smiled at her and beamed at Keron.

They rode at a brisk pace all morning. It was a grueling jaunt in the most humid portion of the day for Fale. She felt the heat of living things, awakening with the rising, burning sun, vying for her air. Even the foliage seemed to trade its condensation for her breath, sucking the very air from her lungs. Her hair, in a bun, let loose pieces here and there to curl and stick to her neck or face. The insects feuding for her body seemed to search for bare patches of skin or openings in her clothing.

By now the whole group was calloused or rubbed raw from their saddles, but no one would let Fale heal them in those places, and Fale had no help herself. They rode along the beach as much as possible, and just inside the tree line when they couldn’t, to stay close to the river. The beach was an easy and smooth canter, but the jungle trees required much more care.

At their afternoon stop, Keron chose a clear beach spot and laid out the tarp for Fale. They watered the horses and relieved themselves, then ate a light lunch of bagels, peanut butter with honey, jerky, and raisins.

“Are you all ready to talk to Taran?” Fale asked.

“Have been,” Izzy said yawning.

“Sure.” Keron finished packing the food box and closed the lid.

“Yes,” Lisle looked supportively at Fale.

“Thanks,” she told him, and he smiled. Keron looked hurt, so she grabbed his hand and squeezed. Fale closed her eyes and lay back. Keron caught her head in his hand and gently lowered her to the tarp. She lay still for several minutes, first flexing different muscles and releasing them, then lying perfectly motionless.

Fale sat up. “Whoa, where’m I? Oh, hey there, mates.”

“Hi Taran,” Lisle said.

“Did you make it to the dungeon?” Keron asked.

“Me an’ the fellas made it into the castle an’ we woulda been caught, too, but Minova was followin’ me.” He chuckled, which sounded odd coming from Fale.

“What happened?” Izzy asked.

“Minova wouldna let ‘em catch us. She used her trick on ‘em an’ opened up the doors, they did,” he said. “Didna give us no trouble, neither.”

“Was Nelson down there?” Lisle asked.

Fale shook. “Eesh. You don’ even want ta know what’s down there, but Fale hasta hear it. Minova’s probably tellin’ her now. The peoples bein’ experimented on by the machines, all right. They got metal faces. Some of ‘em is blind, with flat nose holes and metal saw teeth. Most of ‘em got their tongues bit off wit’ their food. They eat all kind o’ nasty smellin’ muck. Some people got all kinds o’ metal parts. Tools, mostly. Some’re locked up where I can’t see ‘em, and some of ‘em can only moan. Nelson is down there, wit’ some other prisoners, waitin’ ta be worked on. But he’s all right for now.”

“I think I’m going to throw up,” Izzy said.

“It’s horrible scary, Miss,” Taran said.

“Then what happened?” Lisle asked.

“My mates went... Hey guys, I’m back.”

“It really freaks me out when you do that,” Izzy said.

“What?” asked Fale.

“Appear,” Izzy said. “Taran was talking.”

“Oh, sorry. I didn’t know.”

“It’s okay,” Keron said.

“Yeah,” echoed Lisle. “It’s fine.”

“So... did you see Minova?” Keron asked.

“Yes.”

“And she told you?” he questioned.

“Yes,” she said again.

“What’s the plan?” Lisle asked.

“I told Minova to send the boys to get Nelson out of the dungeon and hide him in Garrith,” she said.

“Fale!” Izzy exclaimed. “They could be killed.”

“With Minova they can do it. Her power of suggestion will keep them protected. Nelson’s being held hostage and put up for ransom... but I’ve turned them down. It’s the only way I can make him safe. The only way.”

“We know how much he means to you, Fale.” Lisle put his hand on hers. “Nobody is blaming you for acting, but maybe we should have a plan.”

“What kind of plan can we have? We’re not in control here. The slaves in Garrith are the ones that have to go into the dungeon and actually face those monsters. They can’t rescue those people, Lisle, there’s nowhere for them to hide; no place for them to go where they won’t be found. But the boys can rescue Nelson and maybe a few others, and so they should, quickly.” Fale was impassioned to tears.

“They’ll get him, Fale,” Keron said.

“Yeah,” Izzy agreed.

Fale spent the rest of the afternoon’s ride deep in thought. How could she talk to Taran? How could she hear him? Get a message to him? Could she somehow go to Taran without trading places? Maybe there was something in Lisle’s book for that. If only she spoke Crion. Fale waited until Keron and Izzy were deep in conversation and turned to Lisle.

“Do you think you could help me look for a spell in your book?” she asked quietly, looking at the couple ahead.

Ever perceptive, Lisle asked, “What secret spell do you want to know?”

“Is there a spell to project someone without taking their place?”

“Like two people in one head?” he asked.

“Yeah, I guess,” she said.

“So, you want to communicate with Taran?”

“Shhh,” she shushed him.

Keron looked back and Fale smiled at him. Izzy pulled his attention back to her and he turned around.

“Why is this a secret?” Lisle asked.

“I have my reasons, Lisle.”

“Does it have anything to do with Taran being a ‘hottie,’ or because mister misogynist is

so jealous?" Lisle joked.

"Not funny. I just want to talk to him. And I need to explain some things to Minova."

"You think Taran will help you interpret to her?" he asked.

"I hope so."

"I can look in the book, but I can't promise anything."

"Thanks, Lisle," she said.

"When do you want to try this?" he asked.

"After Keron and Izzy go to sleep?"

"I'll meet you by the fire, then," he said. For the rest of the ride to camp, she thought of the things she would ask Taran.

Chapter 5

Dinner that night was a hearty pot of beans and lentils, with chunks of sausage, served with rice. Each one in the group ate well and Keron played his guitar while Fale trained with her swords. They each washed up in a pot of soapy water in the privacy of their tent and Fale healed some blisters Izzy had gotten on her hands from gripping her reins. Keron chose to let his blisters turn into calluses.

Fale practiced her other powers, too, showing Lisle how she had learned to point at the trash to disintegrate it and making only her left side invisible, then just her bottom half. Lisle clapped for Fale as if she were a show and she bowed.

Soon everyone retired to their tents for the night. Fale looked questioningly at Lisle and he winked at her. She nodded and followed Keron into their tent. They changed mechanically, facing away from each other. It tore her apart to feel the space between them when they had once been so intimate with each other.

“Goodnight,” she slipped into her bed.

“Sleep well,” he told her.

Fale lay down and rolled toward the tent wall, listening to Keron’s breathing. When she was sure he was asleep, she waited several more minutes and snuck out of the tent and to the fire. Lisle was already sitting there with his worn book open on his lap.

“Hi,” she whispered.

“Hi.” He scooted over to make room on the tarp for her. “This may not work.”

“That’s okay. It’s worth a shot,” she said.

“I like your attitude.”

“Better than Izzy’s,” she joked. He laughed quietly with her.

“Let’s do this,” he said. “Lean back and relax.”

She closed her eyes and calmed herself as she usually did. She listened to his words and they were different, but the cadence was similar. When she felt buoyant this time, however, she didn’t plow into Taran’s body. She hovered for a moment and made a soft impact into his head. It was like she could hear an echo when he spoke.

“Whoa. Strange,” he said. Taran was in his hut and it was still dark outside.

“Hi Taran,” she spoke softly into his head.

“What’s goin’ on?” he asked, looking for the voice.

“It’s Fale. I’m sorry to scare you, but I wanted to talk to you,” she said. She didn’t mean to terrify him, and she could feel his anxiety, but this was the only way they could speak.

“You jus’ be showin’ up whenever ya want, huh?” he asked.

“I’m sorry. Should I leave you alone?”

“Nah. I don’ mind. Jus’ givin’ ya a hard time is all.” Somehow, she knew he was grinning. He handled the projection so casually. If it had been her, she would have been shocked, afraid, and not up for jokes. She wasn’t in the mood for his jokes now.

“That’s not funny.”

“Sure was,” he said. “I gotta go ta breakfast. Unless people’ll be thinkin’ I’m crazy, I better talk to ya here. So hurry.”

“Can you get Nelson out? And hide him?”

“Think so. Minova’ll help so we can do’t tonight. We got a family what needs a man around the hut, so he’ll be a help there. They’ll hide ‘im fer sure,” he said.

“Is he okay?” she asked.

“Dunno. He looked a little worn out, but so’s ever’body here. Can’t imagine what he’s been seein’ down there.”

“I’m sorry about taking your body over before, I didn’t know it would happen,” She apologized again.

“S’okay. Minova thinks it’s great. She likes ya,” he said.

“I like her, too. In fact, I need your help with something.”

“Somethin’ else?” he laughed.

“You really aren’t funny.”

“O’ course I am. What is it?” he asked.

“Do you know the legends of Queen Effailya? How she comes back?” she asked.

“Yep.”

“This is hard to believe, but she did come back. It’s me. I’m the queen. I have the key. I’m going to get the machine and free you all,” she said.

“Ah...”

“And I don’t know how to tell Minova. I don’t want her to think I lied to her or kept something important from her all this time.”

“The queen, huh?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said.

“Guess I shoulda seen that one comin’,” he said. “With your magic an’ all.”

“Can you help me tell her?” she asked.

“Lemme rescue this Nelson first. He raised you right? Then we’ll worry about Minova,” he said.

“Yes, Nelson took over for my father.”

“Why’d you never call ‘im your da?” he asked.

“My da?”

“Yeah, your da, your father,” he repeated.

“Oh, my dad. I couldn’t. I had this big hole labeled ‘Dad’ and I couldn’t bring myself to put anyone else in that place. It’s not like Nelson didn’t earn it, you know. He saved me from myself, I was so destructive. He helped me channel it. He helped form me. I should have called him my father; he would have loved that. His life was put on hold, and now he’s suffering in a dungeon, for me.”

“You’ll have yer chance ta fix it. Now ya gotta get outta my head. I need ta go ta breakfast,” he said.

“Bye, Taran.” She let go and thought of her own body and was snapped back like a rubber band to Lisle who was still reciting his spell.

“How’d it go?” Lisle asked.

“It went well,” she said. “They’re getting Nelson at nightfall. Come on, it’s really late. Let’s get to bed.”

“I’ll see you in the morning,” he said.

“Thank you, Lisle. You always come through.”

“Inevitably.” He smiled at her.

“Goodnight.” She slid into her tent and zipped it.

“Goodnight, Fale,” Lisle said and went to bed.

She was just settling into her sleeping bag when Fale heard them. Horses crashing through the underbrush, with no regard for secrecy. The riders were talking loudly, but she couldn’t understand their words. She jumped up and grabbed her swords.

“Keron,” she hissed at him.

“Huh?” He saw Fale strapping on her swords and immediately sprang into action. “What is it?”

“Listen.” She cocked her head, trying to hear the riders.

“...find ‘em...we been...make camp...” They heard from a distance.

“I’m going to get Lisle and Izzy.” Fale ducked out of the tent and searched for signs of torches. They had to be traveling with light, or they would break their horses’ legs. There it was, to the north, a flickering yellow. She silently unzipped the tent and poked her head in. Lisle must not have been asleep long because he was jolted awake by her whisper.

“Lisle? Izzy?”

“What’s happening?” he asked softly.

“Horses. From the north. I think they’re planning to make camp, but it sounded like they were searching for somebody.”

“Wake up, Izzy.” Lisle shook her sleeping bag and covered her mouth as she opened it to scream. “We have visitors. Not the good kind.”

“What do we do?” Izzy asked.

“We get away from these tents,” Keron answered from behind Fale. “I already put out the fire. Let’s go. Let’s go.”

Izzy and Lisle scrambled up, put on their shoes, and Keron ushered them into the jungle heading west. They crouched behind some foliage-covered logs that must have fallen years ago and now made a half wall, perfect for hiding behind. They were silent, kneeling together to see over the tree wall.

“Cain’t see nothing, Jett,” one man said. “We gotta stop.”

“Jett?” said another, shriller voice.

“I smells sumpin. It be smoke. Somebody ‘round here’s gots a fire.” The deep voice must be Jett.

“Is it the ones we lookin’ for?”

“Shut up, Nil. You twos go that way.” Jett again. He must be the leader.

Fale smiled in the darkness. They certainly weren’t hired for their brains. They’d never make it out of the jungle without their leader...She had an idea.

Torchlight entered their campgrounds. Two burly men wearing dingy flannel and denims walked up to their fire pit. They bent down to feel the heat coming off the coals. They would know the group hadn’t gotten far.

The men peeked inside the tents and looked at their supplies.

“Should we look far ‘em?” one man asked the other. They relit the fire and took a seat.

“Nah. They be comin’ back. They ain’t going nowhere wit no stuff.” Jett strolled into view. He was tall and angular. The shadows played with his creepy features. Broad forehead, sunken cheeks and a prominent chin. He looked dangerous. This was one to watch for.

“What do we do?” Lisle whispered.

“They’re not going to leave until we go back there.” Izzy chewed her fingernail. Her eyes looked shiny.

Keron looked at Fale and smiled. “Got a plan?”

“The two wouldn’t be a problem without Jett.” Fale began.

“Who’s Jett?” Izzy asked.

“Have you been paying attention at all?” Lisle’s eyes were wide in bewilderment.

“Of course, I am.” She hit his arm. “So how are we going to get them to leave?”

“Leave it to me.” Fale stood in the shadow of a tree.

“Wait. What’s your plan?” Keron grabbed her forearm.

“Trust me. If they think we’re running, they’ll chase.” Fale was confident she could lure them away from the others and separate Jett from the goons. Once the two were lost in the jungle, she would dispatch Jett. She knew she was being impulsive, and she knew she should have told Keron the plan and let him help, but she was running out of time for her plan to work.

Keron looked into her eyes. He trusted her. She could see it and it made her heart ache to be so close to him and yet so far. She coached herself and straightened her spine.

Keron nodded. "I will wait for you." He slid his fingers down her arm. He would wait for her to call for his help. But she wouldn't be calling. She would prove to him that she could handle herself and be a queen. She would show him that she was worthy of being treated like a leader.

"When I yell, I want you all to shout with me and then be quiet again," Fale said. They nodded.

Leaving the group hidden, Fale crept over to the horses. She untied them and mounted Snowdrop. Holding the reins of two other horses, she walked them over to where the fallen tree was in her sight. She kicked Snowdrop in the haunches and the horse took off in a thundering of hoofbeats. The other horses followed, pounding down the fallen limbs and crunchy jungle floor debris.

As she passed the fallen tree, she yelled, "Ha! Come on Snowdrop! Let's go!"

"Yah! Follow Fale!" Keron's deep voice carried.

As Lisle and Izzy were wailing unintelligible noise, Fale looked back to see the men jump up and run to their horses.

Perfect. Her plan would work as designed. She led the men on a long chase, trying to tire them. When she had gone far enough to make sure the men would be lost, she turned sharply right. When she passed the trees, she made herself and the horses invisible. They rode right past her. One... two...

Where was Jett? Her heart raced and she breathed in shallow gasps. He must be at the camp. Had he found the others yet? Were they all right? She tried not to panic.

Fale turned the horses around, staying out of sight, and raced back to the campsite. She could hear nothing over the horse's hooves and the frantic rush of blood in her ears. Her chest ached from the pounding of her heart. Then she heard the screaming.

She rode right into the middle of the action. "Lisle!" she shouted, tossing him the reins.

Keron lay on the ground under Jett, wrestling away the knife aimed at his neck. Lisle was looking through his spell book. She didn't have time to look for Izzy. Fale ran at Jett and kicked him in the kidney with all her strength. He grunted as he fell away.

"Are you okay?" Fale smiled at Keron.

"Yeah. I—"

"So, you be the one." Jett jumped up with the speed of a Takanori. "You be all the fuss." He circled her with his knife held out.

She circled with Jett. Keron rose behind her and his warmth seeped into her back. They were a unit again. She pulled out her sword.

"Come on."

Chapter 6

Jett stepped to the left, looked to the left, but swung right. Fale blocked the knife but took a slice to her forearm.

“Fale,” Keron said.

“I’ve got this.” Fale was panting from the horse ride. She pulled the sword in and sliced an arc through the air, intending to take Jett’s arm off his shoulder. He leaned back with dexterity. He’d been trained.

Keron stepped away, but Fale didn’t have time to wonder where he was going. Jett kept her swinging and blocking. She had thought her sword could out-manuever any knife fight; but she was wrong. She was never going to win this. They were matched in skill and both riding an adrenaline high.

She smacked his hand down, only for it to slap her face. His movements were quick and calculated. When Fale felt the twinges of fatigue hit her muscles, she took a step back. He moved to advance on her, but a piece of rope was wound around his neck. Keron stood behind him holding both ends of the tent string, pulling tight.

She wanted to set him free. She wanted Lisle to find a spell to compel Jett to start a new life. But she knew if he was alive, he would be hunting her. Queens make hard decisions all day for the good of the mission. Could she allow this, though? Could she watch Keron snuff out this man’s life?

“Wait.” She put her hand out just as Jett lost consciousness and fell limp.

“What?” Keron asked.

“I have another idea. Lisle, can you find a compulsion spell?” Fale patted Jett’s pockets for any useful tech but found nothing.

“Yeah.” Lisle walked over with his book open. “I found a few options.”

He began his chant in the language of the Crion. “Luvae, surimous, havae sumorrum.”

Lisle nodded at Fale.

“Jett?” She leaned down to rouse him with a few strikes to his cheek. “Jett, you need to go east. Just keep going east until you can’t go anymore. Then start a new life in The Glass Plant. A good life.”

Lisle snapped his fingers and Jet shook his head.

“Who are ya? What I’m doing on the ground?” Jett looked at all of them.

Fale smiled. “I think there’s somewhere you have to be.”

“Oh yeah...east.” He got up and swung himself into his saddle. Fale watched him ride into the night. She felt good about what they’d done. Magic was sometimes needed to make the best decision.

“Where is Izzy?” Fale asked the guys.

“She was the one who put out the fire,” Lisle said, closing his book and tucking it under his arm.

“What fire?”

“When you left, the two followed you, but Jett took a torch and started to burn our stuff,” Keron said.

“Keron rushed at Jett, and Izzy put out the fires before anything got really damaged.” Lisle continued sheepishly, “I was looking for spells.”

“It’s okay, Lisle. We all play our parts.” Fale put her hand on his shoulder and he yawned. “We should all go to bed.”

Fale slept right through Keron’s buzzing watch, but also his waking, talking and changing. He rubbed her back. “Fale? You okay?”

“Hmmm? Just tired.” She turned her head his way.

“It’s time to get up.”

“Can’t we rest one day?” she complained.

He chuckled. “We can rest when we’re on the boat.”

“I hope it doesn’t make me sick the whole time,” she said.

“Why would it? Have you ever been on a boat?” he asked.

“No, but I read some people get sick on the ocean.”

“Not us, Fale. Don’t worry. It’ll be a huge boat. Now, let’s go.” He peeled back her sleeping bag top, exposing her to the crisp morning. The riverside was cooler than the rest of the jungle at night.

“That’s unfair.” She pulled her pajamas, covering herself.

“I’m going to make breakfast, then I’m packing this tent, even if I have to dress you myself.” He winked at her. She threw her boot at him and missed. He laughed and escaped out the tent flap, narrowly missing her other boot.

“Oooh,” she fumed. “I dare you to try.” Fale got up and put on her uniform of denims, shirt and boots with swords. Wearing her swords was a little tricky, to keep them out of the way of her mount, or from rubbing together. The long sword was traditionally set sharp edge up, on the left side, handle forward; and the short one was worn with the hilt to the right, across the body, both in a sash-belt. But Fale wore them crossed on her back. She could reach back and grab them both if she crossed her arms over her chest. Fale packed her bag and rolled her bed, then went in search of breakfast.

Keron had made sausage and hard cheese bagel halves with coffee. It was exemplary cooking, lightly toasted, the cheese soft and delicious. Fale groaned in satisfaction.

“I agree,” said Lisle. “Good idea, man.”

“Thanks,” Keron said smugly.

Izzy made the biggest deal, eating two halves. "I've never tasted anything so delicious," she uttered in delight. "You should be our cook *and* our guide and protector. You're perfect at everything." She put her hand on his leg. "Do you have any other talents we don't know about? You play beautiful guitar, and you can fight, what else do you like to do?"

Keron was put on the spot. Fale knew Keron was uncomfortable in the limelight, and Izzy had just put him centerstage.

She said, "He goes to the gym and he likes to read when he gets the chance, which is rare. And he's been experimenting in the kitchen."

"I was asking Keron," Izzy said.

Keron gave Fale a relieved glance and said, "She pretty much covered it. I don't have time for much. Well, I didn't as a bondsman. I don't know what kind of job I'll get when this is all over. I suppose I get to choose what I want to do, for the first time."

"Won't the people notice you're fantocci?" Izzy asked, waving her hand through a cluster of flies. "Ew."

"Only if I show them." He looked down at himself and held his hands to the side. In long sleeves and denims, it was impossible to tell he had stainless valezsan alloy limbs, due to the synthetic flesh covering his hand and foot.

"Oh. What about fighting?" Izzy asked.

"He won't have to do it anymore." Fale smiled at Keron. "He belongs to himself now." Keron's broad smile incensed Izzy because it was wholly directed at Fale.

Fale knew she was pushing Izzy's buttons and she thought of adding some very personal talents that Keron had shown her in their time at the house, but that conversation would be too inappropriate, and she didn't want to see any change in the way Keron was looking at her right then.

"I know he won't *have* to anymore, but what if he wants to?" Izzy asked. "Keron enjoyed fighting." She smiled like she knew something Fale didn't.

"He can spar with one of us," Fale said, generously including Izzy in her offer. "Or he can join one of the small-ring night-fights every once in a while, as long as he keeps up his disguise and name, right Keron?"

"Right, I guess. I hadn't really thought much about it."

"Who says we have to live in Alloy City anyway, right Keron?" Izzy said. "We could move to another city now that you're not a bondsman anymore. How did you get so good at being a Wardsman, anyway? You seem so natural at it."

"You really are a great Wardsman, but I should stay with my people," Fale interjected. "I mean, once I set them free, where are they going to go?"

"They'll want you to be the new queen," Lisle said.

"Right, but nothing says Keron and I have to stay there," Izzy stated.

Keron wrinkled his brow in thought. "Thanks guys. It means a lot that you trust me as a guide and the group protector. I think I started loving the outside when I was little. I remember

suffering a horrible injury at the plant, but I was so small, my guardian had to take me to the Medical University Campus for surgeries. We camped on the way there and back, and we had to return as I grew, until I could be fixed with bigger parts in Alloy City. I loved campfires and sleeping under the stars. I never wanted to go back. I hated the fantocci barracks.”

“If I ever become queen, I will make a lovely home for the orphans. We will find a way to help the fantocci,” Fale said.

“Gasten won’t stand by and let you become queen, plus there’s Control and the whole new government. They’re working together as it is,” Keron reminded her.

“We’ll have to make a new plan,” Fale said. “If you stay in Alloy City, that is.” She smiled despondently at him.

“I’m not going anywhere, Fale,” he said.

Izzy huffed and took her cup to the river to wash it. When she came back, she threw it in the food box and stormed into her tent.

“What’s the matter with her?” Keron asked.

Fale looked at Lisle. How could Keron be so smart and so oblivious at the same time? Lisle shrugged his shoulders.

“Don’t know,” she said innocently, tossing her coffee into the fire.

“Time to go?” Lisle asked.

“Yeah,” Keron said.

“I’d better get my tent down.” Lisle got up. “Izzy, I’m taking the tent apart,” he called out.

Izzy squeezed out the slit in their tent with her bag and bedroll.

“Fine.” She took her things to the luggage pile for Keron to load on the horses and went to pack the food. Fale killed the fire.

They were saddled and riding in half an hour and baking in the morning sun. They had been riding at a walking pace along the beach for three hours by the time it was ten o’clock.

“How are you doing, Lisle?” Fale held her reins lightly.

“I’m okay. Burning a bit in this sun, though... I...”

“You...what?”

“I’m thinking about my place in the world. Izzy wants to leave Alloy City, you have people to rescue, even Keron has a purpose here. I guess I’m wondering why I’m here. I mean, I want to help you set the people free, I need to, but I feel like there’s a bigger purpose for me somehow.”

“Oh Lisle, you are a great friend, and you know just about everything. You’ll figure it out. You’re part of the team, and I wouldn’t want to take this journey without you.”

“You’re going to give me a big head.” Lisle laughed lightly.

“Well don’t blow up on me. We don’t need two people who think they should be the princess.” Fale laughed with him.

“I couldn’t believe Izzy this morning,” Lisle said.

“Unfortunately, I can.” She scratched a mosquito bite on her wrist.

“Does she really think she can take him right out from under you?” he asked.

“Yes, she does. She told me so. Actually, she said it’s working, and that she needs to get him away from me.”

“He’ll never move to another city,” Lisle said. “I can’t see it. He still loves you.”

“Do you think so? I guess I know it, but it would be nice to hear. He’s never said it, you know,” she said.

“Never?”

“Nope. He almost did, right after we broke up, but I stopped him. It hurt too much.”

“Oh, Fale. That’s so sad.” Lisle gazed at her. “You deserve to be happy, with whomever you choose.”

She was touched by his willingness to give up his love for her to satisfy her happiness. “Thank you, Lisle. You are an honorable guy.” She steered her horse away from a hole and it brought them closer together.

“I try. Why don’t you go up there and ride with Keron for a while? Send Izzy back here and I’ll make up something to talk to her about.”

Fale’s eyes twinkled, “Really?”

“Sure, go ahead.” He nodded his head.

Fale clacked her tongue to her teeth and advanced her mount forward. “Lisle wants to see you, Izzy.”

“What does he want?” she asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Well, go ask him.” Izzy said.

“He said to send you back there.”

Izzy sighed, “I’ll be right back, Keron.”

“Okay, Iz,” Keron said absently while he watched Fale.

“Hi,” Fale said.

“How are you?” Keron sat regally in his saddle, his back straight, his hips moving with the rhythm of the horse and the reins held in one hand. He was just missing a hat. It was the sexiest she’d ever seen him.

He chuckled.

She realized she was staring and blushed a hot pink. “Sorry. I’m good. It’s nice to be up

here again, with you.”

She wanted to hit herself in the face.

“I think so, too,” he said. “It gets boring only talking to one person all day long.”

Fale couldn’t think of a single thing to say. They rode in silence as if they’d just met. She tried to simply enjoy his company, but she grew more anxious by the minute. She didn’t know how much time she had before Izzy came back so she blurted out the next thing to come to her mind.

“So, do you want to spar later?”

He laughed. “Sure, I could use the workout.”

“Why are you laughing at me?” she asked.

“I couldn’t think of anything to say, either.”

“Am I that transparent?”

“Only to me, Sprout,” he said.

Her insides melted. “Do me a favor?”

“Yeah?”

“Don’t ever call Izzy ‘Sweetheart.’” She watched him smile.

“I won’t.”

“Thank you,” she said.

“As long as you never look at Lisle like that,” he said gruffly.

She smiled at him. “You know, speaking of Lisle and Izzy. I know we thought we could convince Izzy we were the good guys, but I’m thinking it was a bad idea to bring her. Not just about us fighting, but I think she sees me as the enemy of Alloy City.”

“It could be the way you-”

A hissing, rattling noise caused Fale to look down and see a large tan snake with a black pattern on its back. It had to be several feet in length, but it was coiled in upon itself, obviously having been frightened by the horses. She watched in slow motion as the snake reared its head back to strike Keron’s horse. Without thinking, Fale reached over and took a handful of Courageous’s mane, turning the stallion invisible. The snake, seeing no threat, did not know where to attack.

“You did it,” Keron said.

“I did.” Fale was dumbfounded. She yelled back to Lisle to go around the snake and Keron looked at her proudly.

“I knew you could,” he said.

“I didn’t,” she admitted.

“You don’t have enough faith in yourself.”

“That’s what I keep you around for.” She grinned.

“Fale, you know I’m—”

“Hey Keron, I’m back.” Izzy approached. “Lisle just missed me and wanted to apologize. Fale, you can go back now.”

Keron saw an expression of melancholy on Fale’s face and regretted Izzy’s return for the first time.

Fale halted Snowdrop and waited for Lisle to catch up.

“How’d it go?” he asked.

“It was lovely,” she breathed.

“You really miss him, don’t you?” Lisle looked at her sympathetically.

“I ache for him.” She didn’t want to hurt Lisle, but she knew the truth was less painful than a lie, in the end.

“I’ll talk to him when I get a chance,” he said.

“About what?”

“About Izzy. The truth, he must see it. She can’t afford to make any progress in this game she’s playing,” he said.

“I’m afraid he already believes her over me anyway, Lisle. He told me himself,” she said.

“We’ll talk man to man. It’ll make a difference. Promise.”

“Okay. When you have time to be alone, and the time is right.”

Everyone had jobs for setting up camp. Keron chopped wood for fires, while Fale got water and Izzy unpacked the horses. Lisle set up the tents. Then Fale lit the fire, and whoever got done first, scouted the area looking for everything poisonous, venomous, or anything simply painful. Keron fed the horses and they rotated cooking duties. It took them almost two hours on average, depending on how long it took Keron to find dry tinder.

That afternoon it had rained, as it did most days; the beach was damp, so Keron had to search for suitable wood. He took Lisle with him and left the girls to set up camp. Fale did her job and Lisle’s while Izzy did hers and Keron’s.

They laid out the tarp and sat in awkward silence, waiting for the men to come back. Fale was plagued by the same questions over and over. Why was Izzy doing this? Where was the machine? How would she liberate Garrith? She didn’t bother asking Izzy, she knew the answers would hurt somehow.

When the sun had set and there was still no sign of the guys, Fale paced the tree line.

“Keron! Lisle!” she yelled into the jungle. “Where are you?”

She bit her nails on one hand and made a flame with her other one. It was a brilliant yellow flame that gave color to her anxiety. She gave them ten more minutes. Fale was struck with an idea and began rummaging furiously through Keron’s saddlebag. She pulled out the compass and

started walking straight east.

Fale called through the trees, “Keron? Lisle?” Hearing no answer, she walked further.

“Hey, don’t leave me here in the dark.” Izzy joined Fale, holding onto the back of her sleeve. Fale held her flame aloft.

“Keron? Lisle? Where are you? This isn’t funny,” she yelled, half expecting them to jump out and scare her. She picked her way through vines and prickly edged plants. Every few minutes, she called out to Keron and Lisle. They stepped quietly, listening for voices, or animals of the night.

“Ack! Ick! Ick, ick.” Izzy yanked a handful of Fale’s shirt backward and stopped abruptly.

“What?” Fale nearly screamed, choking on her neckline.

“I just stepped on something. It was crunchy and then slimy. Ewww. It’s all over my boot. See?”

“Are you mentally malfunctioning?” Fale put away the dagger she had drawn. “I thought you were hurt.”

“I didn’t say ‘help’ or anything. Geez.” Izzy crossed her arms and rolled her eyes.

“Okay, let’s go. And look where you step. There are always snakes down here, you know.”

“You have the light. I can’t see!” Izzy was in full pout.

“I can’t help that. It’s. In. My. Hand.” Fale held her palm aloft and she watched a few streaks of red flow through her flame.

They walked on. After thirteen minutes on her watch, they were ready to turn around and try something new.

“We’re going the wrong direction,” Izzy said, smacking a mosquito on her hand.

“Keron doesn’t usually branch out so far,” Fale said. “I don’t know if we should go north or south.”

“Shhh. Listen.” Izzy said.

Fale heard muted voices. She held up her light and shouted as loud as she could. “Keron? Is that you?”

“Fale? Fale! We’re over here,” Keron hailed.

Izzy ran to him, thrashing through the tall foliage, and threw herself into his arms.

“Have you been out here this whole time?” she cried.

“We got lost,” Lisle volunteered, opening his arms to Izzy for a hug. She rolled her eyes at him.

He grinned.

Fale came over. “We were worried,” she said.

Keron pulled her into his arms. “Me too.”

Lisle picked up firewood and stacked it into Izzy's arms. "Here, help carry this." He smiled.

"How'd you find me?" Keron spoke into Fale's hair.

She pulled back, showing him the compass. "We came east, the way you left."

"We got turned around somehow." He looped a piece of hair over her ear.

"I'm glad we came then." Fale looked up at him in the flickering light of her flame.

"You were smart," he said tenderly.

Lisle cleared his throat. "Let's get this wood back and start a fire, I'm famished."

Izzy silently seethed all the way back to camp, carrying an armload of wood, while Fale lit the way and held the compass pointing west. The men followed with armfuls of logs and kindling. They had a roaring fire in fifteen minutes thanks to Fale, who helped Lisle with dinner. She used the rest of their bagels and the end of their cheese to make grilled cheese sandwiches, with a side of soup.

After they ate, they all washed their dishes in a pot of soapy river water. They took turns washing up in the river, giving each other privacy. Fale took the opportunity to wash her clothes and undergarments, wringing them out and hanging them on the tent to dry. By the time everyone was fed, clean, and dry, it was getting late. So, they went to bed.

Fale was too hot to sleep in her sleeping bag. She knew it would cool down in the early hours, but the humidity made her clothing cling to her. She lay on top of her bed, looking at the tent ceiling.

"Sorry we didn't get to spar," Keron said.

"We'll have other times, I'm sure," she said.

"You've been very understanding," he offered.

"About what?"

"Lots of things."

"I'm trying, Keron. I really am."

"So am I," he said.

"I know."

"Think you can ride with me tomorrow?" he asked.

"Do you really think that will work?" she asked him.

"I guess not. Lisle apologized and I know you're trying, I just don't see why Izzy still feels like she needs me so much," he said. "But I can't leave her on her own when she needs me, you know?"

"I know, Keron. You're a good man. I know right now you and I don't agree on some important things, but I don't think it's your fault. I feel like your intentions are good," Fale said. "That's one of the many reasons why I—"

“Why you what?” he asked from his sleeping bag, just an arm’s length from hers. Two feet apart and she could be in his arms.

“*You* know,” she said, suddenly shy.

“Can I hear it? Just this time? You don’t have to say it again. Please?”

She looked into his luminous blue eyes and saw his pleading, and she was undone. “Why I love you,” she whispered.

Keron closed his eyes, leaned his head back, and savored the moment. It was all he could do not to climb across the tent and kiss Fale. But he’d promised he wouldn’t; he’d said he would respect her decision until she’d found that damned machine. And he was a man of his word- his word was all he had. It was his honor.

Keron would have said the words back to her, but he knew she didn’t want to hear it yet. He knew when he said it to her it had to be something special, meaningful to Fale, not just him.

“I’m in this to the end, Fale,” he said.

“The journey?” she asked.

“The journey, setting the people free, the fight, becoming queen, whatever may come,” he said.

“Whatever comes?” she asked.

“*Whatever* may come.”

“How soon ‘til we get to the coast?” she asked.

“Probably by tomorrow evening,” he said.

“Where will we stay?”

“I imagine we’ll stay in a guest house,” he said.

“So, this is our last night in the tent,” she confirmed.

“For a while,” he reminded her.

“This is a long trip. And we don’t even know how far the island is by sea yet,” she said.

“What are you worried about?”

“Will we have nights together on the boat?” she asked.

“Probably not,” he said. “What is it, Fale?”

“Izzy takes your days; I’ll never see you,” she said in a tiny voice.

“Oh, I see.” Keron lay on his side and raised his arm. “Come here.”

Fale crawled over and lay facing him. Keron lowered his arm to hold her to him. “Better?”

She rested a hand on his chest. “Much.”

“We’ll figure it out, okay? Izzy will just have to learn to share,” he said.

“I don’t think she’s going to like that.”

“Maybe you can try to apologize,” he suggested.

“Me? I don’t- She’s the one- Sure. Whatever you want. I can talk to her again,” she said.

“Good, now go to sleep.” He kissed her forehead and rested his chin on her head.

Fale dreamt that she was running and afraid, but she couldn’t see what was behind her. The first time she turned around, it was the toothless man with the knife from behind Izzy’s building. She ran harder, but she never seemed to go anywhere. When she turned around again it was Izzy behind her, whose face turned into a monster. A metal monster with saw blade teeth. The fiend grew closer and nearly touched her when Fale woke with a jolt.

She was sweating and breathing heavily. Keron gazed down at her, “Bad dream?”

Fale’s leg was thrown over his and her hands dug into the skin of his chest and arm.

“Oh, sorry,” she released him.

He chuckled. “It’s okay. Want to talk about it?”

“Not really. It was strange and scary,” she said.

“I’ve got you.” He tightened his hold on her. “Do you want to sleep some more or get up since it’s almost time?”

“Let’s make coffee,” she said. “I’m excited to get to the ocean.”

“They say it’s deeper than the mountains are tall.” He sounded like a little boy.

“And full of creatures as big as buildings,” she added.

“I can’t imagine,” he said.

“Me neither, but I’ll bet it’s amazing.” She got up and scooted toward her bag, only to realize all her clothes were drying on the tent. Fale checked her clothes outside, but they were damp and full of ants, so she kept on dry ones and left the others until she was ready to pack.

Keron got up and the two of them sat by the fire together, shoulder to shoulder, silently supporting one another. When Lisle emerged from the tent and saw Fale sitting with her coffee in calm contentment, he smiled at her, trying to hide his discouragement. He was pleased to see her looking so happy for a change. Izzy was another story. She glared at Fale until she looked broken again.

They ate oatmeal and dried fruit, then dispersed to break down camp.

“Talk to her,” Keron urged Fale.

“I will.”

Fale put out the fire while Izzy packed the food nearby. “Keron wants you to back off,” Fale said.

“The hell he does,” Izzy said.

“I’m serious, Izzy. He doesn’t understand why you are so clingy. He’s just being nice.”

Izzy got an evil glint in her eye. “What did you say to me?”

“I said Keron’s just being nice to you.”

“Well, I need him,” she said.

“No, you don’t, Izzy. So back off,” Fale said in a deadly tone, for the first time standing up for herself.

There was the sound of a throat clearing behind her and Fale cringed. Keron had heard her. She turned around with an apologetic expression, but Izzy immediately began to cry and threw herself into Keron’s arms.

He glared at Fale. She had just made it worse and proven he’d been right the first time, which made her a liar in his eyes.

“Did you need something?” Fale asked Keron.

“I was coming to say... never mind. Maybe you should ride with Lisle for a while this morning,” he said to Fale. To Izzy he said, “And I’m not just being nice to you. I do, um, care.” He tilted her chin up.

Izzy beamed. Fale was furious and so tired of Izzy’s game. She was losing fast; she had to find a way to beat Izzy at her own scheme. She’d plot with Lisle today. They’d have time on the boat to carry out a devious plan.

Chapter 7

When they set out that morning, Lisle and Fale stayed a good distance behind Keron and Izzy. Far enough to see them but still have a private conversation. They shot down one idea after another until Lisle landed on a feasible plan.

“Will that work?” she asked.

“Izzy’s pride won’t let her leave it to chance; she’ll walk right into it,” Lisle said.

“If not, I could get stuck in a compromising position.”

“I’ll intervene,” he promised.

“All right, when do we do this?” she asked.

“I still want to talk to Keron about Izzy first, so we’ll put our plan into action after we’re settled on the boat,” he said.

“Okay,” she laughed, then turned serious. “You should have seen her smug expression this morning when Keron led her to the horses like a glass doll.”

“I’m glad you finally stood up for yourself.”

“A lot of good it did me,” she said.

“Keep it up, being queen is like this all day, every day. You will always be judged,” he said.

“I don’t mind it coming from most people, but from Keron, it’s different.”

“I know,” he said.

Fale heard him as though he was down a long tunnel. Her sight faded and she fell unconscious.

Lisle grabbed Fale’s reins and pulled the white horse over to him, grasping her denims by the waistband.

“Keron!” he shouted.

Keron turned in his saddle. “Hang on Lisle, I’m coming.”

Together they lowered Fale to the ground and decided to have lunch while they waited for Fale to wake. They ate the end of their beef, snack mix, and crisp bread with peanut butter.

Fale sat up and shook her head, looking around.

“Easy.” Lisle put a hand on her shoulder. “What happened?”

“It was the Sage again.” Fale put a hand up to her head and squinted her eyes.

“What did she want?” Keron asked

“She said I was going to need my magic when we got to the island. She told me I will gain new powers and master them.”

No one spoke.

“I’m glad I brought the Ondah, then.” Fale said, looking at Keron, but he was obviously still mad from this morning and his jaw flexed as he ate, ignoring her.

“Well, I’ll help you practice,” Lisle said. “Maybe when we get to Port City.”

“What will we do with the horses while we’re gone?” Fale asked Keron, who was leaned back with his arm behind Izzy. That hurt Fale more than it should have.

“Have to find a place to board them in Port City, ‘til we get back to them,” he said.

“What about our gear?” she asked.

“Won’t we need it in Everlign?” Lisle asked.

“Correct,” Keron said.

“We’ll need some more food,” Izzy commented.

“They’ll feed us on the boat, but we’ll go shopping in Port City. We should take some things to trade with the Everlignians, for food and information,” Keron said.

“I don’t know how friendly they’ll be to strangers if they want to be kept a secret,” Izzy mused.

“Good idea.” Lisle nodded slowly at Keron.

“Well I’m not a total idiot, dweeb.”

“I didn’t say you were, knuckle-dragger.” Lisle smiled.

“You certainly did.” Keron smiled back.

They bantered back and forth for several minutes until Fale got up and brushed off her denims. She could smell the saltwater. Though the river wound back and forth, all she could see were trees. She imagined that she could see the sun shining off the waves. Excitement flooded her blood. She bounced on the balls of her feet, and then she started packing up the travel box. She knew Keron was mad, but she didn’t care this time. She wasn’t going to let him wipe-out her fire. Queens believed in themselves.

“Are you in a hurry?” laughed Lisle.

“Yeah, I’m ready to see the ocean,” she said. “Do you think we’ll have time to swim in it?”

“Did you bring your suit?” Keron asked.

“I have mine,” Izzy said. “I come prepared.”

“I never really got to pack,” Fale said. “I was hoping to buy one.”

“We’ll see,” Keron said.

Lisle pursed his mouth. “If we have time, Fale, I’ll make sure of it.”

She brightened. “Thanks, Lisle. Come on guys, let’s go.”

Lisle opened his mouth, but Keron spoke, “We’re about ready. You can fill the canteens.”

“Okay,” Fale bounced around to each person collecting canteens to fill them.

“Izzy will you take the Iodine to Fale?” Lisle asked.

“Why don’t you do it?” she asked.

“Because I want to ask Keron something.”

“Then you can ask in front of me,” she said.

“Why don’t you run it to her real quick, Izzy?” Keron asked. He batted at the swarm of mosquitos that flew in his face.

“If you want me to,” she said cheerfully, grabbing the bottle from the kit.

“Aren’t you being a little hard on Fale?” Lisle asked.

Keron appeared to think about it. “No. You didn’t hear her talking to Izzy this morning,” he said.

“She was only standing up for herself—”

“Here I am. What’d I miss?” Izzy plopped back down by Keron.

“Nothing,” Keron said. Izzy smiled triumphantly at Lisle.

“It’s time to go. Hurry up, Fale,” Keron called.

“Coming,” she said with a smile.

They saddled up and rode for two more hours before coming upon scattered huts and small shops. The pathways were pebbly, and the trees had thinned out to very few.

“We must be getting close,” Keron called.

They joined a large path and followed it out of the trees to a tan sandy beach littered with shells, seaweed and sideways walking crabs. There was a great rushing crash of waves onto the shore and Fale looked out over the greatest expanse of water she’d ever seen. The shushing of the water was so loud they had to shout over it.

“Where to, taskmaster?” Lisle asked.

Keron waved over his shoulder in the direction he was going. He followed signs to the Port City Inn. Keron procured two rooms and gave Lisle one key.

“Our rooms adjoin,” he said.

Lisle nodded. “Should we unload the horses now? How will we carry all the supplies to the boat?”

“I’ll send word to the freighter that we’re here and they can send over help in the morning,” Keron said.

They put their supplies in their rooms and asked the front desk where to board the horses.

“The stalls are to the north of the city. You’ll go past all the tourist shops,” the manager replied.

“Perfect,” said Fale. “We can buy our items for trade on the way back.”

“And eat a decent meal,” Izzy stated.

“Fine,” Keron reluctantly agreed.

The slow ride through town was full of loud music and hot sun. Fale couldn't help the feeling they were being watched. Like a fly buzzing around her head, that she couldn't see, but she knew was near.

“You need one of those hats.” Lisle pointed out a floppy brimmed hat to Fale.

“I need one of those swimsuits.” She pointed to a store with mannequins wearing bikinis.

Lisle smiled. “I'll buy you that gold one,” he said.

“I don't think Keron has swim shorts, either, I'll have to get him some. Do you need any, Lisle?” she asked.

“No.”

They decided they would come back for a blue azure silk scarf, a set of carved bowls in white bone, some sunglasses, a few shiny necklaces, a box of tobacco and a tin of tea for trade. By the time all four of Fale's group had ridden to the stalls and checked in their horses, it was four o'clock.

They spent two hours shopping on the way back buying everything they had seen, plus some liquor, a mirror and hair items. Izzy was hungry so they stopped to eat.

The restaurant was crowded and humid, the doors and windows open to the ocean air. A rooster bobbed his head and pranced around the place like he owned it. Fale enjoyed watching it pester a scrawny black cat. They hissed and clucked at each other. The waitress brought their food. They each ate shaved chicken on corn tortillas, with beans and rice, tamales and stuffed peppers. Everyone was full and held an armful of bags, so they walked slowly back to their rooms.

“I'm going swimming,” announced Fale.

“Not alone,” Keron said.

“I was hoping you all wanted to come with me,” she said softly.

“I have no desire to play in water with sharks and who knows what else.” Izzy flopped backwards onto the nearest bed.

“Lisle?” Fale entreated.

“Can you give me a little bit, Fale? I just ate.”

“Sure.” She looked so disappointed.

“Go put your suit on. I'll sit with you.” Keron sighed.

“I got you a suit, too, if you want to join me,” she said hopefully.

“I might put my feet in,” he said.

They closed the adjoining door and Fale went into the bathroom. Using her new razor, she shaved quickly and put on the new suit Lisle had chosen.

“Are you coming out of there?” Keron knocked on the door.

“Coming. I needed to shave,” she said.

“Oh.” Keron sounded awkward.

Fale opened the door and his mouth was still in an “oh” shape. Her white hair fell around her milky shoulders, the tips resting on the swell of her breasts. Her pink cheeks and red lips smiled with her olive-gold eyes reflected in the shimmery gold just covering her most intimate places. Her taunted stomach stretched from hip bone to hip bone, sunken from their days of light eating and travel. Keron gazed down her slim legs to the floor and back to her eyes.

“Do you like it? Lisle picked it out,” she said.

“You can’t wear that,” he said.

Her face fell. “You don’t like it?”

“No—”

“Hey guys- I changed my mind. I’m coming with you.” Izzy opened the adjoining door and stopped when she saw Fale. “Lisle’s coming, too.”

“Great,” Keron handed Fale a towel. Lisle entered behind Izzy in her purple one-piece, which happened to be extremely flattering, but his eyes spoke his appreciation of Fale’s swimsuit.

“You wanted us to go, so let’s go,” Keron said sourly.

Fale ducked her head and led the way, but when she got to the beach, she forgot all about Keron. Throwing her towel down, she ran into the waves. She was surprised by the power of the pull in the water. It knocked her off her feet and she shrieked in amusement. Izzy planted herself on her towel and soaked up the warmth of the late day sun.

“Come on in, guys!” Fale waved.

Lisle laughed at her merriment as Fale splashed and ducked under the waves. She dove to pick up seashells and let the sand sift through her fingers. Keron even caught himself smiling as he watched her.

“Keron, come see what I found,” she called, standing in the water to her chest.

“Don’t leave me here by myself,” Izzy said.

“You have Lisle.” Keron pushed himself up. Fale watched him walking toward the surf, his turquoise shorts covering him from his hips to his knees-- one leg flesh, one valezsan. His upper body, the physique of a fighter, lean and defined, was phenomenal-- one arm muscle, one valezsan.

She smiled broadly at him as he waded out to her. “What is it?” he asked.

She pulled a big shell out of the water that curled in on itself and was inhabited by a creature with many spiny legs and a set of pincers. Its antennae moved about in each direction.

“What is it?” he asked again.

“I have no idea. Some kind of crab, I guess. Isn’t it creepy? I almost stepped on it,” she laughed. “What should I do with it?”

“Throw it,” he smiled.

“Really?”

“Yeah, I don’t want to step on it.”

She gently tossed the shell into deeper water and squealed as something brushed her leg.

“What?”

She picked up the offending seaweed and tossed it after the shell.

“Isn’t this amazing?” She spread her arms.

“It is.” He watched the joy on her face and regretted some of his behavior from earlier. Impulsively, he picked her up and propelled her through the water. She screeched her excitement, jumping toward him and wrapping her arms around his neck.

He stood facing the horizon with her body cradled in his arms when she leaned her head back and kissed his neck. It was salty and she tasted it with her tongue. He stiffened. She kissed up the side of his neck to his jaw and nipped the muscle there before working her way to his ear, lightly sucking his lobe between her teeth.

“We have one night together, let’s not fight,” she said, her voice deep and husky.

He shuddered. “Fale.”

“Just let me touch you. I know you’re mad, but I need you,” she said.

He groaned. “You drive me crazy, Fale.”

She kissed the corner of his mouth. “Is that a good thing or a bad thing?”

“It’s not ideal right now.”

“Then put me to bed,” she whispered in his ear.

“You will be the death of me,” he looked down at her as the first stars of the night appeared.

“What are you two doing?” Izzy called, wading to her shins.

“Looking at seashells, Iz,” he yelled back, setting Fale on her feet. Her hands drug across his body when she let go of his neck. “Fale,” he warned.

“What?” She grinned.

They splashed back to the shore and dripped water on Lisle.

“Hey,” he protested. Fale’s laugh made him smile. She shook her hair at him. “I give up,” he held up his hands.

Everyone wrapped up in towels. They were walking back to the inn when Fale’s senses tingled. She felt like they were being watched again, and she shivered.

“You feel it too?” Keron asked her, looking around.

“Yeah.” She automatically reached for her swords before remembering she was nearly naked under her towel, with only her beach bag.

A man stepped from a hut nearby, then another walked toward them from a shop next to the inn.

“Should we make a run for it?” Lisle’s voice sounded too high.

“Fale?” Keron looked to her and she was pleased that he was consulting her.

“I say we walk right past them.” She took the lead position.

As they got closer to the inn, Fale saw the man on her left look back, so she looked over her shoulder to see two men approaching from behind. She sped up, so did everyone else.

Chapter 8

When the men were surrounding them about two yards away, Fale yelled, “Izzy, spin kick, five o’clock.”

Everyone whirled into action. Fale ran forward, pulled her foot back and kicked the man nearest her in the face, while Izzy kicked back with her right leg. Keron boxed with his opponent, trading punches. Fale’s partner fell back, leaving her room to move forward, but as she did, he rounded on her, grabbing her forearm and trying to pull her away.

Izzy used her training with the man behind her but found herself struggling with his height and long reach. Fale heard chanting, feeling the crackle of magic in the air. She sought out Lisle as she resisted the pull of the dirty hand on her arm. He was being held from behind by a brute of a man, his hair a mat of tangles, dirt visible on his face and ears. Lisle’s eyes were closed, and he chanted passionately, his amulet glowing.

“What he doin’?” The rancid stench of rotten teeth hit Fale.

“Beats me,” she said, twisting to get a better view.

Keron still fought and Izzy was knocked back on her rear, the man towering over her, when suddenly each of the wizards’ men yelled something different. It was clear though, they all had the same problem.

“I cain’t see,” one shouted.

“Where you gone to?” added another.

“What happenin’ to me eyes?”

Fale pushed her adversary backward, ripping her arm away in his confusion. He reached for his pocket and swung blindly at her with a penknife, but she easily jumped out of the way. Keron and Izzy both punched their rivals and Izzy spun hers around to make him dizzy.

The opposition all yelled and Fale looked around to see if they were drawing attention. One wrinkled man leaned up against the inn in the circle of a porch light, his arms crossed, grinning wildly around an oddly shaped pipe. He appeared to be entertained with their run of bad luck. Keron was prying the arms of Lisle’s competitor loose and Izzy laughed at her man’s cries of confusion. Fale narrowed her eyes at the old man.

“What do you know, mister?” She walked over to him.

“I don’t know nothin’,” he said, chewing on the end of his pipe. Fale could just make out the pipe was in the shape of a woman holding the bowl atop her head.

“You don’t know these men?” she pressed him.

“Ain’t never seen ‘em afore.” He nodded to her. “Ain’t never seen *you* afore neither.”

Fale snorted. “That’s awfully convenient. Are you sure you haven’t seen them around?” She pulled out a few coins she had traded for credits earlier, and his eyes grew round.

“I mighta seen ‘em here, scoutin’ the place fer a few days.”

“Yeah?” She jingled the coins in her hand. “Did they say what they were looking for?”

“One of ‘em said they’s after a gal with a important key.” He leered at her in her swimsuit with her key on display. The look in his eyes got greedy.

“Don’t push your luck, old man.” She gave him the coins and turned to walk back to the others, with his chuckle behind her.

The wizards’ men were sitting on the ground, back to back, with their hands up. Lisle’s amulet still glowed, and Keron kicked the foot of one of them. Fale could hear them complaining and pleading with her group to give them back their sight. Izzy was collecting their weapons.

“They’ve been here a few days,” Fale told the others. “Tell me Lisle, how long can you take their eyesight?”

“It’s temporary. It’ll wear off after I leave them.” He held his hands above them.

“What if you had your spell book? Could you take their memory for a few days?” Fale asked him quietly.

“I couldn’t undo the last few days, but I could sure make tonight fuzzy, and leave them confused for two or three days.”

“Then they’d forget they found us. It would give us time to board the ship and depart. They’d never know we were here, maybe even keep looking, since we came down the north face of the mountain...” Fale thought out loud.

“It could work,” Keron said.

“I’ll go get your book, Lisle. Think you guys can hold them here?” she asked.

“We’ve got it.” Keron smiled at Fale, putting an arm around Izzy.

“Be right back.”

Fale retrieved the spell book and Lisle found what he was looking for, casting a spell of utter confusion on the men.

Fale looked at the old man wreathed in pipe smoke. “Tell them whatever you want, just leave us out of it, you hear?”

The old man bounced his palmful of coins. “I might need a few more for that.”

Fale handed him a few more and he grinned with his gums. “I’ll tell ‘em they had too much drink, and I ain’t seen no buncha young’uns come down the hill.” He pointed his thumb over his shoulder at the mountain.

“Thanks.” Fale smiled at the older man.

They left the henchmen huddled together in the courtyard and found their rooms at the inn. Izzy turned on music and dug through her bags, preparing to get changed.

“I need to wash this salt off,” Fale said to the group.

“Me too,” Keron said.

“There’s room for two,” she said just for him.

“Fale,” he growled.

“Be right back then,” she sang.

Fale came out in her pajamas and the sky was black; almost ten o’clock. She checked on Lisle and Izzy. Lisle was already snoring, and Izzy was reading literature from the bedside table drawer. Fale swung the door shut.

“What are you doing?” Izzy asked.

“I have a headache and Lisle’s snoring bugs me,” Fale said.

“Boo hoo. You and me, both, but you’re not closing that door,” Izzy said.

“It’s only for a little while,” Fale said.

“I don’t know what you have planned, but forget it,” Izzy said. “The door stays open or I’ll pound on it.”

“Goodnight, then,” Fale said.

“Goodnight,” Izzy sang cheerfully.

Fale had never wanted to punch Izzy more than that moment.

Keron came out of the shower and got into the bed. “Why didn’t you close the door?” he whispered.

“She told me I couldn’t, or she’d pound on it,” Fale said.

“Who? Izzy? That doesn’t sound like her,” he said.

“Are we back to this? I’m not lying, Keron. Oh, go to bed,” she sighed.

“I didn’t say any- You know, what? Fine.” He turned over and was fast asleep.

Fale woke up to the sight of Izzy leaning over Keron. “Good morning,” she crooned.

“Good morning, Iz,” he said drily.

“You slept late. It’s almost time to go. They’ll be here soon to take us to the ship,” Izzy said.

“Thanks, Izzy. I guess I’ll get up and change. Fale?” he asked.

“I’m up,” Fale said.

Izzy remained at Keron’s bedside. “Um, Izzy, can you go get us some coffee?” he asked.

“Sure.” She left, and Keron and Fale put on their clothes. Fale decided to forgo the swords while in the city, and Izzy returned with coffee for Keron.

“Did you get any for Fale?” he asked her.

“Did you want me to?” she asked innocently.

“Never mind. Here, Fale.” Keron gave the coffee to her.

The ship’s porter showed up fifteen minutes later in a motored cart used for loading and

travel. Fale had never been in a motor vehicle before. She had no need, everyone walked in Alloy City, except for shipping vehicles that came through. It was exhilarating to feel the wind and speed without having to move her body.

Their first view of the freighter was overwhelming. It was bigger than anything they had ever seen.

“We’re sailing in that?” Izzy asked. “Will it float?”

“It has to,” Lisle said.

“I don’t see how.” Keron craned his neck to see the highest deck.

“It’s huge,” exclaimed Fale.

The porter led them onto the Santavina at eight a.m. and took them to their rooms. They were several floors below the bridge of the ship where the captain commanded. Fale appreciated the space of her cabin and checked both doors leading from her sitting room. One was a bedroom and one was a connecting bathroom with a shower. She was tempted to take a long hot shower in the privacy of her own room, but thought she’d have time later.

Her sitting room had a small fridge she put her water bottle in, and a desk with paper and a pen. She had two chairs and a sofa with a small table stacked with periodicals. The window was above the sofa, so she kicked off her boots, enjoying the feel of carpet, and sat to thumb through a magazine.

She would let the others settle in. Then she needed to contact Taran. She didn’t really need anyone to do it anymore, but she knew they would want to know, and Taran would probably seek them out anyway. Fale and Izzy had rooms near each other in the bow, and Keron and Lisle were down the halls on either side of the ship.

Lisle knocked on Keron’s door. “Come in.” Keron unpacked his duffel bag.

“Hey,” Lisle said. “Are you free?”

Keron raised an eyebrow. “Yeah. What’s eatin’ you, Lisle?”

“It’s Izzy.” He watched Keron’s demeanor to see if he would be defensive. “She’s playing a game with you. I don’t get why you can’t see it.”

“Look, I’ve known Izzy a long time. She’s just a homesick girl who’s needy. A little clingy, yes, but she’s used to getting everything she wants. Fale could tell you that.”

“Come on, Keron. She’s used to getting what she wants all right, but what she wants is you- she told Fale she’s going to take you right out from under her,” Lisle said.

“Izzy? I don’t believe it. She’s always so agreeable,” Keron thought out loud.

“To you maybe, but not Fale. Can you blame Fale for telling her to stay away?” Lisle asked.

“It was still rude,” Keron said. “And Izzy didn’t deserve it.”

“That’s what I’m trying to tell you. Izzy’s *earned* it,” Lisle said.

“Lisle, I know you’re Fale’s advocate, and I appreciate you looking out for her, but she’s just jealous of Izzy because I’m spending time with her. She’s going to have to grow up a little to be queen... and this will help,” Keron said.

“You self-righteous-- You have no idea how strong Fale is or how much she’s grown up since being stuck with you. You’re judging her for a trait that you suck at, by the way. I thought you’d see the obvious, but you’re more pig-headed than you look.” Lisle walked out and slammed the cabin door, leaving Keron gaping after him.

The first day the ship left the dock they all spent the day unpacking, resting and lounging on the deck. They looked for sea creatures and were rewarded with the view of a whale’s back and tail gliding through the water; as smooth as black glass. One of the officers gave them a tour of the whole ship.

“What’s in the containers?” Fale asked.

“We ship whatever we’re paid to carry, but most of those are empty because we aren’t going to any ports,” he said.

“How long will this trip take?” Izzy asked.

“We estimate it to be twenty- five days, if the island is really there,” he added, grinning.

“Why wouldn’t it be?” Fale asked.

The officer frowned. “Sorry. Of course, it will.”

“That’s why we’re going isn’t it?” Fale asked. “Why would you sail somewhere you don’t believe is there?”

Keron held up his wristband. “Credits.”

“Right,” the officer said.

He showed them where the safety equipment was stored and went over the procedures for evacuation with them. They each checked their life jackets to get a snug fit. Then, they were free to roam for the afternoon.

“Lisle? Do you think we can call on Taran tonight? Whenever you’re ready, of course,” Fale asked.

“Sure, Fale.”

“Okay, just come to my room,” Fale said.

“Why is Lisle coming to your room?” Keron looked at Lisle and tried to appear unaffected but was unsuccessful.

“To switch with Taran,” she answered patiently.

“Am I invited?” he asked.

“Of course,” she said. “You too, Izzy.”

“Whoopee.” Izzy circled her finger. Lisle raised his eyebrows at Keron.

That evening, after a supper of salad, soup and a white fish in a creamy, tangy sauce, everyone gathered in Fale's sitting room. Izzy sat on the sofa and patted the seat next to her.

"Keron," she called.

Fale touched his hand as he passed. Lisle watched Fale sit glumly in her chair as Keron took a seat next to Izzy.

"Ready?" Fale asked.

"Yes," Lisle answered.

"I'd really like to talk to him myself, but since I can't, make sure they got Nelson and that he's safe. I'll give you five minutes, they should be sleeping," Fale said.

Lisle watched her go through her routine of motions, then she began to snore.

"Taran," he said. "Taran, wake up. It's Lisle."

"What? Am I dreamin' or is she comin' in me sleep now?"

"You're not dreaming, sorry," Lisle said.

"We aren't in the trees anymore. Are ya ta the machine?" Taran asked.

"No, we're on a ship. The island is a long way away."

"Watcha be needin' me far?" Taran yawned.

"Actually, Fale wanted to check on Nelson. She wants to know if he's all right and if you got him out," Lisle said.

"Do she now?" Taran chuckled. "She's a pretty little spitfire. Lucky man, ya are, Keron."

"They aren't together," Izzy volunteered and Keron cringed.

"She's free, eh?" Taran tilted his head.

"No," Keron's voice was low and quick.

Taran gave Lisle a questioning glance, then shrugged. "I got 'im. He's with a family what's hidin' 'im in trade for chores. He's lookin' pretty good. Skin's a little pasty and weak, he is; but a might happy ta know Fale's alive an' well. Weren't too happy she was in the trees with ya, Keron, but I told 'im it was all good. I freaked 'im out with the whole Fale an' me's switchin' places, too," He boomed with laughter. "Minova hadda tell 'im ta calm down. 'Specially when he found out Fale was the queen."

"How did you know that?" Keron asked. "We never told you."

"Fale told Minova," Taran said. "Minova an' me's a duke an' duchess. She musta wanted her ta know."

"Interesting," Lisle said.

"You're a duke?" Izzy leaned forward.

"Yep."

“How did that work, when the queen died, surely there was an heir to the throne?” Lisle asked.

“Since the queen sent her’s self to the other dimension, they decreed it that the queen was away from the throne, but she was still ruler, she was, til she come back. Now all we got’s dukes and duchesses and such, but nobody goes by title ‘cause o’ the machines. They’re right awful if’n ya got a title,” Taran explained.

“So, they’ve been waiting for Fale all this time?” Keron asked.

“Yes sir,” Taran said. “They’ll be mighty proud when she finds that machine.”

“Do you know what it looks like?” Lisle asked.

“It be big. That’s all. It’s been too long. An’ Gryndoll took all our books way back,” Taran said.

“It’s Gasten, now,” Lisle said.

“They’s all stinkin’ wizards,” Taran sneered.

“Lisle’s a wizard,” Izzy spoke up.

Taran widened his eyes in astonishment. “Do Fale know?” he asked.

“Yes,” said Lisle. “I’m not with them, though.”

“You used to be,” Izzy said.

Fale’s eyes were saucers.

“Stop,” Keron nudged her.

“I helped Fale, Taran, and now they’re after me. I’m safe, I promise.”

In Garrith, Fale was talking to Minova. “I want to see him.”

“He’s safe. I told you, they’re hiding him.”

“I believe you, but if you had one more chance to see your mother, would you let anything stop you from hugging her one last time? Especially if you knew she was in danger?”

“No. I wouldn’t let anything stop me.” Minova stood up and slipped her tiny leather shoes on. “Let’s go.”

“Thank you Minova.”

“Don’t thank me yet. We’ll have to sneak past the patrols.”

They snuck out of the hut and darted to the shadow of the next one. Fale looked up to see if there were full moons, but she was surprised to see only one. Minova held her arm out in front of Fale, in utter silence. Fale could hear a soft snoring from inside the hut they leaned on, and the crunch of grass from their feet. The grass smelled sweet to Fale, like it had rained, and the ground was soft. Minova put down her arm and they shot into the moonlight.

“This way,” Minova whispered, waving Fale across to the next row of huts.

They ran to the next shadow and almost right into the back of a guard who was standing there, looking out into the moonlit space between the next two rows. They skidded to a stop, pebbles skipping past the guard's feet and Fale pulled Minova back by her shoulders to keep her from crashing into him. The guard turned and Fale dragged Minova backwards to the end of the hut. Minova fell back onto her hands.

Just as Fale was about to see the guard's face, she hauled Minova's feet around the corner of the building. Fale's chest heaved with her breath and she listened for the guard's footsteps. His metal boots crunched on the gravel path and they scampered backwards, Fale hoisted Minova up and they followed the wall around to the other side of the hut. Minova waved Fale to the next row in time before the guard made a full circle of the structure. They saw another guard down the row of huts they needed to enter.

"Let's go behind," Fale breathed, pointing to the back of the row.

They waited for the guard to turn his head and they ran across the path. Fale winced as her shoes rolled on the gravel and it popped under her feet. They tiptoed to the back of the nearest hut to go down the row, dashing from one shadow to the next. They were one hut away.

Minova pointed to the next building and nodded. Then her eyes doubled in size as she looked above Fale's head. A guard's hand clamped onto Fale's shoulder with a crushing grip. Fale let out a whimper and was surprised to hear how it sounded in Taran's voice. The metal man turned her around. She saw his booted feet, metal molded legs formed under his pants. No shirt covered his metal upper body. She saw his heavy silver arm raised and swinging down to slap her and she panicked. It would surely knock her out, and it wasn't going to feel good, either.

His heart was behind a piece of glass and she watched it beat in time to the blood rushing through her ears. His face a mask of flesh sneering at her. His hand had nearly met her face, when Minova looked around her and quietly said, "Stop."

His attention turned to her and his hand dropped.

"Let Taran go," Minova continued. He let go and Fale fell to her knees. "Now, stay here," Minova ordered and she helped Fale stand. The guard's face looked pained, like he was fighting Minova's orders with everything in him. He managed to whistle.

"Darn," Minova whispered.

"What?" Fale asked as they ran to the other side of the hut.

"That's the signal there's trouble. We're going to have company."

They stood at the door of the hut and knocked, bouncing on their toes. "Hurry, hurry, hurry," Minova chanted in whispers.

Fale tried the door, but it was barred from the inside. Minova knocked on it as loudly as she dared. They could hear feet crunching on the gravel.

"Who is it?" Fale heard a whisper from inside the hut.

"It's Minova, hurry, open up."

The door opened to an older woman with dishwater blond hair. She wore a rough gown and bare feet. "Minova, why are you—"

Fale pushed through the door, dragging Minova with her, startling the woman.

“I’m sorry,” Fale said as she closed the door and put her ear up to it, to make sure no one had seen them. There was noise outside. Footsteps going up and down the row. No one knew where they were yet. Fale breathed out, puffing her cheeks.

“What’s this all about? You know I can’t have you found here. If they find him, who knows what would happen to us? I have the children.” The woman gestured to three children sleeping on pallets in the corner.

Fale looked around and didn’t see Nelson anywhere. “Where is he?”

The woman looked confused. “Taran-”

Minova touched the woman’s arm. “Dandria, this isn’t Taran, it’s Fale.”

They must have already explained things to her, because Dandria believed her, staring open-mouthed at Fale. “You’re the queen?”

Fale squirmed. “Yes,” she said. “I was hoping to see Nelson.”

“Oh. Oh yes. He’ll want to talk to you. But you can’t stay long, if they search this hut, we’re all in trouble.”

“Of course,” Fale said, “but, where is he?”

Dandria smiled. “Over here.” She went to her pallet and pulled it away from the wall, revealing a trap door. “The men all helped dig it out.” She raised the door and called him.

Fale saw a thinner version of Nelson, with deep purple circles under his eyes, like he hadn’t slept in a month. He peeked his head up through the hole and laid his arms on the floorboards. “What’s going on?”

Fale realized he wouldn’t know her. She looked like Taran. Both Dandria and Minova looked at her and Fale felt her emotions overwhelm her. He was safe, he was hidden. She wanted to hug him so bad. He looked at everyone in confusion.

“It’s me,” she said. “I’m Fale.”

His face fell as he looked at her, searching her face for some sign of recognition. “Fale?”

She laughed through the tears that fell. “I told you to be nice to my friends. I should have told you to stay safe.”

“Oh, Fale.” He held his arms open to her and though she was Taran, she knelt to the trapdoor and wrapped her arms around his neck.

“I missed you,” she cried through her tears.

He patted her back. “I missed you too, sweetheart.”

Yelling outside made them all nervous. Dandria twisted her hands and looked from them to the door and back again. “If we want to keep him safe, you can’t lead them to us.”

“I’m sorry,” Fale said. “I just needed to see him for myself.”

“Why don’t you go back? Taran and I can make it back on our own.” Minova put a hand on Fale’s shoulder.

“Are you sure?” Fale sat next to the trap opening.

“Yeah,” Minova assured her, “Taran and I know how to get around here better than you do.”

Back on the ship, Fale’s body relaxed and she said, “It’s me, guys.”

“Fale?” Lisle asked.

“Yeah. Why do you look so worried?” she asked nervously.

“Izzy told Taran that I was with Gasten.” He glared at her.

“Oh no,” Fale said.

“It was the truth,” Izzy said.

“Just because something is the truth, doesn’t mean you should say it,” Fale said. “They got Nelson.”

“Yes,” said Keron. “Did Minova tell you?”

“He’s hidden and safe,” said Lisle.

“And he knows you’re well, you’re with us on the way to the machine, you switch places with Taran and that you’re the queen,” Keron said.

“Really? He didn’t say anything to me about being queen, but we didn’t have time to talk.”

“You saw him?” Keron asked incredulously.

“I had to,” she said.

“Fale. I-” Keron shook his head. “Be careful, please.”

“Are we done here?” Izzy yawned.

“Yeah.” Fale looked at her hands in her lap

“Walk me to my door?” Izzy asked Keron.

“Sure.” He put his hand on Izzy’s back to follow her out.

“Goodnight, Fale,” Lisle hugged her.

“Thanks, Lisle, I needed that,” she said. Keron looked back with longing but left anyway.

She could feel the magic pulling him to her. Did he feel it as strongly as she did? No, he couldn’t possibly, or he would’ve been in her arms.

Chapter 9

Everyone fell into a rhythm the first week at sea. Breakfast was at seven thirty, coffee at ten, lunch at twelve, tea at three, and dinner at six. Lisle took morning walks around the deck while Fale and Keron enjoyed working out with the weight machines in the fitness room and swimming in the seawater pool. They wanted to stay in fighting shape. Izzy preferred to sun herself on the deck with a book from the conference room bookshelf.

“Know what I miss?” Fale asked Keron in the laundry room. Izzy sat nearby and picked her nails, pretending not to listen.

“What?” he sorted his clothes into piles.

“Laundry baskets,” Fale grunted, leaning over the side of the washer to dig out her wet clothes.

He laughed. “You tired of bags?”

“Totally. And finding your socks in my clothes.” She held up a wet sock in distaste and threw it into the dryer.

“What else do you miss?” he asked.

She wanted to say, I miss you. Us. Being alone. But she said, “My apartment. My things. My life.”

“I think I get it,” he dimpled.

She put the last of her clothes in the dryer with a dryer sheet and turned it on. “What about you? What do you miss?”

He picked up a pile from the floor and threw it in the washer. “Nothing.”

She jumped up to sit on the dryer. “Nothing?”

“Nope, I have everything I need right here.” He looked at her and Izzy.

“Awww,” Izzy said. She reached out and touched his arm. Fale bristled at the fact that Izzy got to touch Keron more than she did.

They pulled chairs into the laundry room to the big table and Lisle joined them. “I was wondering where everybody was,” he said.

Fale read a book, Izzy wrote a letter to her father, Keron played a few hands of solitaire, and Lisle worked on a puzzle that he carried around on a puzzle mat. It was coming along nicely, a painting of the beach at sunset. Something Fale would always have a new appreciation for. She had experienced so much on this trip, it was changing her, though most of the time she felt like her heart was breaking. She could feel the magic pulling her and Keron, getting stronger every day. She would need to use the Ondah soon.

“What are you wearing tonight, Iz?” Fale asked.

“My black cocktail dress,” she said nonchalantly.

“You brought that to go into hiding?” Fale asked.

“You never know where you’re going. I brought lots of stuff. I was smart enough to bring a swimsuit, too,” she said.

“I didn’t mean anything by it, Izzy.”

“Sure, you didn’t,” Izzy said.

“Never mind.” Fale turned to Lisle, “Are you going to the Captain’s Welcome Party?”

“Want me to?” he asked.

“Duh.”

He laughed. “Sure. Do I have to dress up?”

“I don’t have anything, so no,” she said.

“Great.” he said.

The buzzer on the washer went off and Keron got up to get his last load of wet clothes.

“Mine should be dry by now, let me check,” Fale said. She opened the dryer and felt her clothing. The fabric was hot and dry. “I’m done,” Fale told Keron. She started unloading her laundry from the dryer into a bag.

“Thank the stars,” Izzy said. “I was getting so bored.”

“Why didn’t you go somewhere else?” Lisle asked.

“I wanted to keep you all company,” she said sweetly.

“Especially Keron and Fale, huh?” Lisle asked.

Hearing his name, Keron turned around, “What?”

“Nothing, hun,” Izzy said.

Fale’s mouth hung open.

“Oh, I thought I heard my name,” he said.

“I was remarking how boring it must be for Izzy to tag around you and Fale all the time,” Lisle said.

“Are you bored?” Keron looked at Izzy with concern. “I can take you back to your room until the party.”

“Only if Fale’s going,” she said.

Fale sighed. “Yes, Izzy, I’m going back to fold my laundry.”

“Why don’t you guys have girl time? You could use it. You can get ready for the party together,” Keron suggested.

“I’m sure Fale’s busy, Keron,” Izzy said.

“It would make me happy to see my favorite people getting along together,” he said.

“Really? I’m your favorite person?” Izzy asked.

“One of them,” said Lisle.

“Shut up, Lisle,” Izzy said. “Fine. Fale can come to my room at seven thirty and get ready.”

Fale looked anxiously at Lisle.

“Okay.” She picked up her laundry bag. “I’ll be there.” She walked down the hall to put away her clothes and choose an outfit.

Fale showered and braided her damp hair, drying it with the blow dryer. Then she folded her laundry and cleaned her room. She took her book up to the deck and sat in the sun to read.

When the sun set at seven o’clock, Fale walked the deck, watching the dolphins swim in the wake of the ship like drops of liquid silver, jumping over one another in the sparkling moonlight. She was reluctant to go inside, but soon she had an eerie feeling. Like someone was watching her. She looked back but saw no one. She shivered and went to her room.

Choosing her dark blue skinny denims and a pink shirt with a sweetheart neck, Fale wondered if she should wear her kimono. Deciding against it, she put on the only other shoes she owned, a pair of white strappy sandals. She added a silver necklace she’d bought to trade in Port City with a sea blue jewel. Then she let her hair down and ran her fingers through the dry waves falling down her back. She braided a small piece from one ear to the other and secured it with an elastic.

Heaving a sigh, Fale put her key in her pocket and went down the hall to knock on Izzy’s door.

“Come in.”

Fale stepped into the room. Izzy was in a black strapped dress that ended in a scalloped hem at the knee. It hugged her in all the right places. Fale was immediately insecure.

Izzy’s hair was curled in ringlets around her head, her dainty gold earrings hanging down. Her skin was flawless and a beautiful shade of penny brown. Her chocolate eyes, lined in black, were luminous. Her cheeks were barely blushed, and her smile was glossy. Had she packed heeled sandals?

Fale shoved her hands in her back pockets and toed the carpet. They both knew who looked fancier.

Izzy won this round. Ding. Ding.

“Want me to do your makeup?” Izzy offered.

“Are you going to make me look like a clown?” Fale asked warily.

Izzy looked Fale up and down, then at herself.

“Not tonight.” She didn’t have to say that she didn’t see Fale as a threat.

Izzy applied silver shadow to Fale’s eyes and blended up. She added black mascara and tinted her cheeks until they were rosy and put a sheer pink gloss on Fale’s lips.

“There,” she said. “All done.”

“Thanks,” Fale looked in the mirror. The cosmetics did twice as much for her self-esteem

as they did for her beauty. She glowed. When the men knocked on Izzy's door, Izzy appeared in her lovely dress.

"Wow. You look great," Keron said. Izzy smiled openly at him.

"Yeah, lookin' good, Iz," Lisle said.

"Thanks, Lisle," she answered. It was going to be a cordial kind of night.

Fale stood up and faced the door.

Keron remembered those denims, the way they embraced her every curve, he could see the silhouette of her body and it made him eager to hold her. Her hair gently waved over her shoulders and her face radiated warmth. He looked at Lisle's open-mouthed stare and was instantly possessive. He reminded himself of what Lisle had said last week and worked to calm himself, but when Lisle crossed the room to hug Fale, pulling her off her feet... He clenched his jaw tight. Keron switched his gaze to Izzy and watched her expression change from furious to charming.

"Are you ready?" Izzy asked.

"Yeah, sure." Keron offered her his arm and she gladly took it.

Lisle walked out with Fale, and Izzy locked her door, giving Keron her key. He watched Fale walking ahead of him all the way to the party in the galley. They met all the officers and ship's mates at the party, but they finally had a chance to talk to the captain. Music played and there was dancing and drinking. The cook served a cake with their names on it.

"It's so nice to meet you," Fale said to the captain. "I'm Fale Argohdian." She realized her mistake after she gave her real name. "I mean—"

"I know who you are," he said jovially. The captain was a large man, imposing, with dark hair and a beard. He wore a red shirt and a hat. "The mages hired me for my secrecy as well as my ship. The crew knows you as Mrs. Palmquist, though."

"Thank you," she breathed her relief.

"You're welcome," he stuck out his meaty hand. "I have the unfortunate name of Ogelsdane Kithyne. Most people call me Kit."

"Glad to meet you, Captain Kit."

"So why are we going to this island, if you don't mind me asking? Do you know how long you plan to stay, if it's there?" he asked above the music.

"You don't think it's there?" she asked.

"I'm a bit skeptical, is all." He grinned.

"I know it's there. I saw it in a vision, but I don't know how long it will take. We're looking for something," she said.

"A big machine, if I understood correctly. That's why we brought the cargo ship."

"Yes." She smiled. "We have to find it first. And figure it out. Or bring it back to the ship if we can carry it and figure it out on the way back. Will you lose business for helping us? We'll be gone for at least two months."

“It’s no problem for us. The mages paid my whole crew for double that, upfront.” He clasped his hands.

“They are so generous,” Fale agreed.

“All we have to do is follow your directions and get you and the machine safely back to port,” he said. She had the passing concern of how they’d get the machine from the port back up the mountain if it was too big for a horse, but if they had to buy a cart, they would figure it out later.

“Follow my directions?”

“You’re the important one,” he winked at her.

She smiled and nodded to acknowledge she’d heard him. “Where do you normally travel to?” she asked.

“We dock in Port City and make stops in the Isles, but we sail all the way around Algea. We anchor at Techno, Glass, Medical U, Stockyards, Water and the power plants,” he said.

“That’s nearly everywhere.”

“There’s a lot of shipping in Algea,” he stated. “We had to stop at Harvest before a trip this long.”

“True.”

“I don’t mean to keep you from the party,” he said. “Go have fun. Welcome aboard the Santavina.”

“Thank you, sir,” Fale turned around to see Lisle behind her with a glass of wine and a beer.

“Which one?” he asked. Fale chose the glass of red wine.

“Thanks, Lisle. Where’ve you been?”

“Meeting people. Was that the captain? I’ve only met him the one time. Does he know anything about us?”

“Yes, that’s Captain Kit. He knows who we are and what we’re doing,” she said.

“Really. Has he been to the island before?” he asked.

“No. He’s not sure it’s even there. It will be interesting to see all these faces when we get there, and they actually see it for themselves.” She sipped her wine and looked around. There were colored lights, and people were feeling looser after a few drinks, dancing with abandon. Fale searched the crowd.

“He’s over there talking to people about his bichanic parts, and she’s not letting him go three feet.” Lisle pointed to Keron with a group of the ship’s mechanical engineers. Keron saw them and waved; Fale waved back. Izzy clung to Keron’s elbow, and glared at Fale, but looked up at him adoringly. He leaned down, placing his hand on hers and spoke in her ear. She smiled and nodded. Then he ducked out of the room.

“Do you want to dance?” Lisle asked Fale.

“I’ve only had one drink,” she laughed.

“You’re a total lightweight,” he replied. “Finish your glass of wine and let’s dance.”

“Oh, what the heck,” she said, guzzling the rest of her glass. Glub, glub, glub. She set her glass down and took the hand Lisle offered. The music was a good mix of old and new, so it was easy to dance to. Fale danced with Lisle until a couple cut in and Lisle left her to dance with another man while he danced with the woman. She was feeling a little fuzzy and uninhibited, and having a good time when a man took her hand.

“Lovely night, huh?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said absently, looking over his shoulder for her friends. Something about this man didn’t feel right. Maybe she was being too sensitive. “Have you been on this ship long?”

“I ain’t—I mean, I haven’t been here long.” His smile showed missing teeth. She looked at the grime under his fingernails and tensed.

“I work in the engine room. It’s mighty greasy down there. Never quite comes clean.” He laughed nervously. Was he sweating?

She felt terrible for judging him. But she couldn’t make herself feel comfortable. His grip tightened on her hand and she breathed small shallow breaths. Who was he?

Keron slid in beside her to cut in. When he took her hand, the man backed up, and bowed to her with his hands in prayer pose. Fale did her best to smile magnanimously. Keron wrapped her in his arms and started to sway.

“Who was that guy?”

“An engine-worker, I think. He gave me a weird vibe.” She shivered.

“Should I go tie him up or something? Interrogate him?” He sounded serious, but he was laughing.

“No. It’s a party. I guess no one can get me out here. Where’s Izzy?” she asked. She really didn’t want her eyes clawed out.

“She doesn’t know where I am.” He pointed to Izzy chatting with a handsome shipmate. Fale laughed.

“You escaped,” she said, and he laughed with her.

“I don’t know why she’s acting so clingy tonight,” he said.

“I do,” she said.

“Why?”

“So, you won’t dance with me,” she said.

“Fale—”

“I bet you ten credits that if she sees us dancing, she comes over here immediately and cuts in.”

“I don’t need your credits,” he said.

“Okay. I’ll bet you one back rub I’m right.” She stuck out her hand.

“Fine,” he said. “Just a minute.” Keron walked over to the man who was playing the music and came back smiling.

“What did you do?” she asked.

“You’ll see,” he said.

After a few seconds the song ended, and a slow song came on. Keron put his hands on Fale’s hips and drew her close. She laughed again.

“How much did you drink?” he asked her.

“Not much,” she answered. “Lisle says I’m just a lightweight.”

“Oh yeah?” He put her hands on his shoulders.

“Yeah. I slammed my wine so we could dance,” she said. “I think it’s hit me.”

“Is he trying to get you drunk?” Keron narrowed his eyes.

“Beats me.” She swayed to the music. “Ooh, I love this song.”

“Don’t let him try anything with you. Do you hear me, Fale?” he asked.

“I won’t,” she said, “but I’m so lonely.”

“Fale. You’ll be okay.”

“The bed feels so big and empty,” she moaned.

“I know.”

“Maybe—” she started.

“There you are. I found you. Thanks, Fale, I’ll take him from here.” Izzy stood there with her arms out and Fale just stared at her. Izzy laughed nervously, “I’m cutting in, Fale. That means you leave.”

Fale looked at Keron. “You owe me,” she said and stalked off.

“What was that about?” Izzy asked.

“Why did you have to be so rude to her?” Keron asked.

“I was only explaining the rules of cutting in for her, in case she didn’t understand. She appeared confused,” Izzy said.

“Oh. Well, you could have waited until the dance was over,” he said sourly, missing the feel of Fale’s body.

“But I wanted to dance with you, I’m sorry.” Izzy managed to summon a tear and Keron was contrite.

“It’s okay, Iz. I’ll see her later,” he said, and Izzy smiled.

The party went on for hours and eventually the lights turned on for the clean- up crew. Fale and her fellow passengers went back to their rooms.

The next week and a half were filled with checking old maps, current radar screens and weather watching. They took part in the officer parties and toured different parts of the ship. They saw where the containers were stored below deck, the engine room, and found a small onboard shop with beverages, tobacco and toiletries.

Fale thought a lot about her life's purpose and how it affected her future. She used to think she would be a Takanori warrior and live a quiet life of training, always on-call for a summit, dispute, or a need for the Takanori to keep the peace.

Now it looked like her life would be vastly different. Would she be welcome in Alloy City after this? What about the mages she brought back? Would they be able to overthrow Gasten and his regime? If not, she would need to live in hiding. Queen of the underground. The idea made her stomach hurt. Where else would she live, if she won? There was no castle.

She was nervous about making decisions for such a large group of people, afraid they wouldn't accept her, excited to understand and fulfill her destiny. She would be upset for a long time over Izzy. This Izzy was not her friend. And where would Keron and Lisle fit in?

In a perfect scenario, Lisle would be the Source Wizard and Keron would rule next to her. But even she knew it would be a fight to make the people accept a fantocci king. Metal-appendaged people were barely considered human, let alone allowed to be in important jobs. She would change that, she would ignore all of it to be with her love.

She didn't want to have to hide her love or her lover. Things would be better though. They had to be. Fale had a kind of blind faith that made her believe if she found the machine and faced Gasten, she would win. That played in the back of her mind while she wrestled with the inability to make any plans for her future.

One evening they had a barbequed pig on the deck in the open air. It was breezy and tepid. The crew had a microphone and enjoyed singing along to their favorite songs, but the best part of the night was when a few of the shipmates brought out instruments of their own and began to play.

"Keron has a guitar," Fale told the musicians.

"Fale," Keron was embarrassed.

"Play with us," the bongo player pleaded.

"I can't. I'm not very good," Keron explained.

"He is too," Fale insisted. "He's just shy."

The fiddle player pushed, "Go get your guitar, we can follow you."

"I really don't play in front of people..." Keron sighed.

"Pleeease?" Fale put her hands together in prayer pose and Keron laughed.

The musicians continued to hagggle him until Keron retrieved his guitar and joined them. Keron was the star of the show and everyone participated in a step dance Fale had never seen. She soon learned the correct placement of her feet and merged with the group. It was great fun.

"Hi." Next to Fale, leaning on the same pole, was the guy from the captain's party.

"Hello," she said warily.

“How have ya been?” His voice held a tinge of anger, magnified by the alcohol. “Havin’ fun while we work?”

“Um, do I know you? I don’t usually talk to strangers. I need to go.”

“Wait!” He reached out and grabbed her arm. “I ain’t no—You jus’ don’t know me yet. I’m Stu.”

“Well, Stu, I really need to go.” She yanked her arm from his grasp. His hair was a dirty brown under a cap that used to be red but was mostly black with filth. Medium build, not too tall, he followed her with brown eyes that danced in the firelight. She watched him from across the room until he retired, but the nervous feeling persisted.

A few mornings, bright and early, Fale and Keron went outside on deck to spar. Fale left her weapons packed, instead deciding to use hands and feet for safety. The engine of the ship thrummed like the beating heart of a great creature. Fale found herself comforted by the constant pulsing sound. When they got to the deck one morning, it had been freshly washed.

“Be careful you don’t slip,” Keron told her.

“Be careful you don’t get your butt kicked,” she teased. He laughed with her.

“Bring it on, tiny queen.”

She looked around, “Watch what you say.”

“Who’s going to think I’m serious?” he asked.

“I guess you’re right.” She punched him in the arm.

“What was that for?”

“You said to bring it on,” she smiled and raised her fists to her face, sinking down into a squat.

He made a fist and bonked her on the top of the head, “Now we’re even. Let’s go, you need some work on your left hook. Come at me.”

She swung and he blocked, twisting her arm behind her body and up, incapacitating her.

“Okay,” she said. “What did I do wrong?”

“I think since you’re short, the left hook would be the best knock-out punch for you because the power comes from here...” He placed a hand on her belly. “You need leg strength and balance, which you have, but we need to work on your technique and speed.”

“Okay, coach,” she said.

“Keep your left foot closer than you normally would when you lead.” He positioned her body, putting her right hand up by her face to guard it, and raised her left arm perpendicular to her body with her fist in front of her nose. “Now step back with your right leg and twist your left toe outward.”

She stood in position and balanced. “Is this right?”

“Both feet pointing in the same direction. Yes,” he said. “Now twist your left toe to the right, while you straighten your body and follow through with that punch, hard. Keep your chin

down.”

She struck out and twisted back with both fists up for defense.

“Good. Do it again.”

She obeyed.

“Try to get past my block,” he said. She aimed for his chin and punched, but he blocked her every time.

The sun was rising, and it was getting hot. The deck was dry by the time she glanced off his hand and landed a blow to his face.

“Good job.” He rubbed his chin and Fale smiled.

She worked with him on the height of his spinning heel kick. “Remember, face away from your opponent, look over your shoulder, pivot and sweep your leg in a big arc. Then snap your kick and hit with your heel,” she said.

He spun and kicked to Fale’s shoulder. “That’s not high enough,” he said.

“No. you need to hit my head, but I’m only about five feet. To fight another man, you’ll have to lean back on your other leg and reach six feet,” she said.

“I don’t think I can do it.”

“I’ve seen plenty of men do it. You just have to stretch.” She did butterfly stretches with him and showed him some other stretching exercises for hips and groin. They play fought for a few minutes, punching, kicking, spinning and blocking. Fale spun and Keron kicked her behind.

“Hey, that’s not fair,” she complained.

“You left yourself open,” he laughed.

“Guess I did. Want to go grab breakfast before we miss it? I’m hungry,” she asked.

“Yeah.”

They walked to the galley in sweaty workout clothes. Lisle was sipping coffee. Izzy never got up before teatime. They ate banana flatcakes, ham, and scrambled eggs for Fale, over easy for Keron.

“I’m gonna be sore from those stretches, I can tell already.” Keron smiled at Fale. “You’re a tough instructor.”

“Speaking of sore muscles, you owe me one back rub from the captain’s party. Pay up,” she said.

“Here? I’m eating,” he complained.

“Fine. After breakfast.”

“All right, can I shower first?”

“Yeah, I could use one myself.” She plucked her shirt away from her chest and let it go. “What are you doing this morning, Lisle?”

“A new puzzle on the deck,” he said.

“Sounds nice, I’ll join you later,” she told him.

Lisle brightened, “Okay.”

Fale finished her breakfast and went back to her room. She peeled off her clothes and showered, putting her hair up in a twisted bun. She wore a green linen tank top and brown shorts, the only ones she had, with her sandals.

Coming to the sitting room, Fale spied the paper on her desk. She wished she had someone at home to write letters to, but she was alone. She supposed she could buy a notebook and keep a journal of her amazing expedition. She decided to do just that. It would fill her days to recall all that had happened so far, and she would always have it to remember. She heard a knock on her door.

“Come in.”

Keron opened the door. He always looked so handsome to her after a shower, the way his wet hair lay, the heat making his face flush and he smelled so good.

He chuckled. She stopped staring and stepped back to let him in. Fale walked over to her sofa and took a seat. Keron sat next to her.

“It seems like forever since we’ve been alone in private,” she said.

“It has been,” he replied.

“I feel nervous, it’s silly.” She laid her hands on her lap.

“It’s not silly.” He put a hand on her back. “We’re allowed to be alone, Fale.” He played with the ring on her left finger.

She told herself not to kiss him.

“My left shoulder blade has a knot in it.” She raised her eyebrows and rolled her arm.

He slid his hand up to her shoulder blade and felt around.

“Right here?” He made circles with his knuckle.

“Mmm hmm.” She winced.

“Turn around,” he said.

She gave her back to him. His long fingers wrapped around her shoulders, touching her collarbone and he dug in with his thumbs. Fale liquefied, her bones turned to mush, as his strong hands massaged her muscles. He ran his palms up and down her back and arms. She never wanted him to stop, but after a while he did.

“What else do you want, Fale?”

She wanted him to keep touching her. Anywhere.

“I guess I’m good,” she said.

He sounded disappointed. “Are you sure?”

“No. I mean, I need to work on my magic. We need to use the Ondah.”

“Oh. Do you want me to get it?”

“It’s in the bedroom,” she said and they both got up.

She found the velvet bag she kept it in and turned around. Keron sat perched on the edge of her bed.

“I guess this is as good a time as any.” She nodded.

Fale got the glass of water by her bed and sat in the middle of her pillows. She pulled the shining disc out and filled it with her water. “Are you ready?”

Keron scooted around the bed to sit behind her. It was a tight fit; she was wedged into his lap. He put his arms around her waist, and she breathed deep to feel his grip tighten. It felt like stability to her. She wanted to lean her head back on his shoulder, but she didn’t let herself. Fale looked into the Ondah. She saw her reflection as queen Effailya and felt the irresistible pull to reach into the water. The tug she felt at her magic caused an immediate resistance within her and instinctively, she pulled back. It was her opposition to the magic that caused the burning. She cried out and tried to pull her hand back.

“Sshh,” Keron soothed her. “Let go. Let the magic in.” He held her with one arm and ran his other hand over her arm and shoulder. She gritted her teeth and groaned in pain. He pulled her hair back from her sweat slicked brow and pushed it over her shoulder to expose her neck.

“Give in to it,” he coached her and ran his lips over the column of her neck.

Fale released her tension and leaned back into him. She felt the power flow over her and allowed the release of the Ondah’s power to work. She ran her hand along Keron’s leg and felt the muscle tense, then relax under her touch.

The arm around her waist inched upward until his hand was cupping her breast. Fiery passion ignited her spirit as she allowed the new power to flow through her. Fale removed her hand from the Ondah and lightly skated her fingers along his arm, arching into his touch. She couldn’t stand his lips on her neck anymore and she turned in his arms to meld her mouth to his.

He kissed her hungrily, holding the back of her head. She reached her hand underneath his shirt and felt the ridges in his stomach, touching him, memorizing his body. She had needed this, needed him, for some time now. Her fingers tingled with the magical connection between them. She couldn’t imagine doing this with anyone else.

He pulled his shirt over his head and threw it. She kissed his chest and he groaned. The sound made Fale’s belly heat and she kissed her favorite spot on his neck, trying to elicit sounds of pleasure from him. He reached for the hem of her shirt and pulled it off, throwing it as well. She shivered as his warm hands covered her skin in long strokes and light touches that made her ache for him.

Keron pulled Fale against him and leaned back. She flung the Ondah to the side and gave into her need to feel his skin against hers. He rolled and settled himself on top of her. They explored each other and when they couldn’t stand it anymore, they slid out of their clothes and merged together. Fale was complete, and she fell asleep in his arms.

When she woke, she traced her hand up his chest.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“For what?”

"I know we had decided we weren't going to be together, but I couldn't help myself."

"That's okay. I felt—" she began.

"It wasn't me. It was the magic."

She wondered why he was ruining everything.

"But I thought maybe we could try being together?" she asked.

"Before we find the machine?"

She thought about Izzy and how Keron truly thought she was a liar. She thought about all the things that still needed to happen and where her focus needed to be. It would be hard to give him up, but if he truly believed it was only the magic that had brought them together, he hadn't learned anything yet. He had to want her, need her. She wouldn't settle for less this time.

"No, you're right. We should wait until we find the machine. When I am successful, I will be able to focus on us."

"I thought you would feel that way," he said, leaning to pick his shirt up off the floor.

Keron got up and Fale let him out, then she went to the little store to buy a notebook; to begin the story of her life. Or would this be the story of her death? How could she have let him in, just to be rejected with her own words? What in the stars had she done?

Chapter 10

Their seventeenth day on board was a rough day at sea. There was a storm and the ship tossed its passengers from one side of the room to the other. There were plunges and thumps so big it was too difficult to walk about. Fale cleaned her cabin and read a book in the morning and by afternoon she sought out company. Keron was at Izzy's bedside as she was seasick, so Fale went to Lisle's room.

The hallway was dark and ominous. As she turned the corner by the galley, she saw a flash of darkness in her peripheral vision. It looked like Stu. But what was he doing so far away from the engine room? Should she tell the others about Stu? What would she tell them? That he gives her the heebie-jeebies? No. She told herself she was safe. She could take care of herself.

"Hey Lisle, want a visitor?" she asked when he opened the door.

"Any time, Fale." He swept an arm inside.

"What have you been doing?" She followed him to the sofa.

"Just reading a mystery novel in bed," he said.

"Oh, I hate to disturb you then." She stopped.

"Nonsense," he said. "I'd rather have you over."

She smiled. "What do you want to do? We could play cards or something?"

"I don't know. Did you have anything specific in mind?" he asked.

"It's been a few weeks since we checked on Garrith," she said sheepishly.

"You want to talk to Taran, right?" Lisle guessed.

"Only if it's okay with you."

"Fale, no one owns you. If you want to talk to Taran, you have every right to do it," Lisle assured her.

"You're right." She sat up straighter. "I am the queen after all."

"Don't go too far," he teased.

"Hush, Lisle. Do you have your book?"

"Be right back." He rose to get the tome. Fale lay back on Lisle's sofa and closed her eyes. She imagined weights in her hands and on her feet getting heavier, heavier. Then balloons lifting them higher and higher. She performed her relaxation ritual and listened to Lisle's voice, concentrating on the cadence.

She heard a familiar echo when she "arrived" in Taran's head. He was working, splitting wood.

"Taran," she said. He nearly threw his axe. "Sorry."

"Where've ya been?" he whispered.

“On a ship in the middle of the ocean. What’s going on? Why aren’t you at supper?” she asked. She felt pain in his body.

“They got us workin’ extra hard on account o’ Nelson bein’ gone,” he said.

“I’m so sorry, Taran. I’m going as fast as I can. We have a week and a half until we reach the island.”

“I’ll be alright,” he assured. “It be the old ones and the littles what I worry about,” he said quietly, swinging his axe again with a grunt.

“I’ll hurry.”

“I know ya will,” he said. The pain was hard for Fale to bear.

She was impacted by his faith. “Thank you. I can’t wait to meet you and Minova.”

“She says you don’ be lookin’ like yerself na more.”

“When we went to the hideout, I bleached my hair white and Keron’s is black. His looks better growing in, though,” she said.

“Why’d you two split?” he asked, slicing a log in half and bending to replace it.

“They told you that? We both needed to focus on our jobs. I thought I’d be able to fix things after I found the machine, but I’m losing him,” she said.

“I’ll be here.” He swung his axe and split another piece in two. She could feel how strong he was.

“Thanks, Taran. I’ve made a mistake with Keron, though. I need to find a way to fix it.”

“Hope ya sort it out. When can I tell the people the new queen’s comin’ fer us?” he asked. “The guards are pickin’ people at random, and torturin’ ‘em on account o’ Nelson.”

“That’s horrible! After I find the machine, I’ll tell you,” she said. “Maybe two weeks? Keep...my father safe.”

“He’s a might upset, he is. He canna handle that the guards’ll be hurtin’ people fer him. The peoples are feelin’ pretty skittish ‘bout it too. There’s talk o’ givin’ him up. Can I tell ever’body he’s the queen’s da?” he asked.

“If it helps,” she said.

“Oh, it will. I gotta keep workin’ afore I get it.”

“I won’t distract you,” she said. “Bye Taran.”

“See ya, Fale.”

She snapped back to her dimension and opened her eyes with a great breath.

“Are you okay?” Lisle was beside her in a second.

“I’m fine,” she said. “They have extra work duty because of us. They are torturing people because Nelson is missing.”

“Oh no. Do you think they’ll turn him in?” he asked. “I can’t help feeling responsible for all of this, because I wanted to be part of the wizards so much.”

“Oh Lisle, you know no one blames you. And I’m not telling anyone you were even a part of them. People are fickle. I don’t think they’ll turn Nelson in though, not when Taran spreads the news that he is the new queen’s father,” she said. Lisle knew how much it meant for her to call Nelson her father. She hadn’t been able to do it in ten years because Nelson had never been able to fill the empty space in her heart.

“Fale. He’ll be so proud,” Lisle said.

“I hope he knows I mean it.”

“He will. You wouldn’t say it if you didn’t,” he said.

“No, but I do speak without thinking, like this thing with Keron. I should never have spoken to Izzy that way. I was just so irritated with her then,” she said.

“Go settle it,” Lisle said.

“Now?”

“Yes.”

“He’s with Izzy, playing doctor,” she said. “Izzy is becoming a problem.”

“I’ll go with you and take over while you talk to him. For once, she won’t be able to interrupt you,” he offered.

She took a deep breath. “Okay, I’ll try it.”

When they got down the hall, they let themselves into Izzy’s room.

“Hey, Iz.” they called as they walked into her bedroom.

Keron was in a chair pulled up to the bedside with his arm circling her and his head asleep on her pillow next to her. Fale stopped.

Izzy smiled. “He fell asleep reading to me. Keron, hon, wake up. We have company.”

“Hmm?” he raised his head. “Oh. Hey Lisle. Fale.”

“We were just checking on Izzy. She looks much better, doesn’t she, Lisle?” Fale asked a stunned looking Lisle. “We’ll come back later and check again.” Fale turned around and pushed Lisle out the door backwards.

She could hear Izzy on her way out saying, “Keron, would you add a pillow behind me?”

“Do you see what I mean about Izzy being a problem?” Fale asked Lisle in the hall.

“It’s bad,” he agreed.

They entered Fale’s rooms. “We have to make him see she’s not innocent after his friendship,” Fale said.

Lisle shrugged, “I tried to tell him, but he wouldn’t listen.”

“Then *she* has to.” She put her finger up. “That’s it.”

“What’s it?” he asked.

“She needs to make her move. But what would cause her to do that?” she asked.

“If she knew you were going to make a move yourself.” Lisle bit his bottom lip and raised his eyebrows.

“Do you think?”

“I’m sure of it,” he said. “Hey, remember that plan we had in the jungle?”

“Yeah.”

“We never followed through with any of it. I wonder if we tweaked it...”

They put their heads together and hatched a plan, then went back to their normal daily activities, biding their time. Izzy was sick for several days, needing to stay in bed and be served by her favorite doctor.

“She’s making *me* sick, now,” Fale told Lisle.

He laughed despite himself.

“Tomorrow,” she said. “We will put our plan into action.”

The twenty-first day of their voyage dawned bright and balmy. Fale’s window was open to the ocean breeze and the sound of the waves slapping the ship. She woke and stretched languidly, in an unexpectedly pleasant mood. She exercised on the machines in the fitness room, then had breakfast and went for a swim in the pool. She joined the others for coffee and sweet bread at ten.

“Where have you been all morning?” Keron asked her brusquely. She recounted her steps for him.

“I have some washing to do after this. Do you want me to throw anything in for you?” she asked.

“I have a few things, but I’ll just do them with you. Are you coming, Iz?” he asked.

“Sure,” she said, obviously not as threatened when she was invited. Perhaps Fale should have tried that a long time ago.

“What about you, Lisle?” Fale asked with a wink.

“Might as well make it a party,” he said.

“Oh joy, a laundry party. I can’t wait,” Izzy said. Keron gave her a scolding look that used to be reserved for Fale. She was never going to accept that look again.

Izzy appeared immediately contrite, then turned toward the window and rolled her eyes.

They each got their canvas bags and met in the laundry room. Fale had put her clothes in the bag by colors and added them to the machine. Keron dumped his bag on the floor and sorted his clothes into piles. Twenty-five minutes later, Fale took her clothing from the washer and put

it in the dryer.

“Keron, could you do me a favor?” Fale asked as she put a new load in.

“Sure,” he said.

“Would you go to my room and grab my swimsuit? I left it in the bathroom on accident,” she said.

“Anything else?”

“My dryer sheets. They’re on my bed,” she said.

“You can use some of mine, if you want,” he offered.

“Thanks, I will for this load.” She took one and turned the dryer on, making a whoosh and hum noise.

Keron left and Fale pulled Lisle aside. As quietly as she could, but loud enough to be heard over the humming of the machines, she said, “Tonight’s the night, Lisle. I’m going to give Keron a night he won’t forget.” She showed him her red nightgown with her back to Izzy.

“Woo hoo,” he said. “That will do the trick.” Fale discreetly tossed the red scrap of fabric in the washer, looking out of the corner of her eye at Izzy, who was craning her neck.

“I’m going to grab my puzzle,” Lisle said.

“Okay,” Fale said. “I’m going to check on Keron real quick. I don’t think my dryer sheets are on my bed after all. I’ll be right back, Iz.” She left the washer lid open. Lisle went back to his room and Fale exited the door to hide on the other side of the wall. She peeked into the laundry room to see Izzy dash to the washer and pull out her nightie.

She smiled. One point for Fale. She left to get Keron and met him in the hall.

“Need something else?” he asked.

“A drink,” she said.

“I’ll get it. What do you want?” He handed her the swimsuit and dryer sheets.

“Iced tea,” she said. “Thank you.”

“No problem.”

Fale took her things back to the laundry room and threw her suit into the washer; shutting the lid and pressing start.

“How’d everything go?” Lisle looked up from his puzzle mat, this puzzle was of the scenic downtown Glass Plant sculptures.

“Perfect,” she winked at him. He smiled at his puzzle.

“Where’s Keron?” Izzy asked.

“Getting something to drink.”

“Oh. I’m going to go clean out my room, it’s a little stuffy, since I’ve been sick,” Izzy said. “I’ll see you guys at lunch and do my laundry later.”

“You sound busy,” Lisle said.

“I, um, have lots of things to do today.” She picked up her laundry bag and hurried out.

“Is it me, or did she look excited?” Fale laughed.

“Oh yeah,” he grinned.

“Wait. Lisle? What if he doesn’t turn her down?”

“He will. I know things look bad, but he loves you, Fale,” Lisle said.

“He did. But I don’t think he does anymore.”

“Are you talking about me?” Keron asked, handing Fale an iced tea.

“That depends,” she said. “What did you hear?”

“I don’t think he does anymore,” Keron repeated.

“We were talking about if you want to continue with the Agency fights, or not,” Lisle saved the day.

“Oh, Fale’s right, in a way. If I do, I want it to be on my terms. Not because someone is making me. I don’t want to be part of the mandatory fight circuit anymore,” Keron said.

“You can’t be part of it, Brock, you’ll be recognized.” Fale reminded him of the new identities the mages had given them.

“Things might be totally different when you’re queen,” he prompted.

“I keep forgetting we have the power to change things,” she said. “You and Lisle could be my trusted advisors.”

“I’m sure they have people lined up for that job,” Keron said.

“I said *trusted*,” repeated Fale.

“I’m all in,” said Lisle. “Does that mean I get to live in the castle?”

“That’s a problem,” said Fale. “Because the castle’s in Garrith, but we’re sending the people back to Alloy City.”

“It had to get there somehow,” Lisle said.

“Where would it go in Alloy City?” Keron asked.

“It used to be right behind where the University is. We could keep it back there,” Lisle said. “There’s still room. We toured the ruins in Archaeology.”

“Great. We know where to put it. How do we get it there? Build a new one?” Fale asked.

“Maybe it will automatically cross dimensions with the people?” Keron said.

“I still can’t imagine how that’s going to work,” Fale said.

“Hopefully the machine has instructions, but I doubt we get that lucky,” Lisle said.

“Things seem to work out,” Fale said. “I refuse to fret about it. Worry won’t take any of the trouble from our tomorrows, only steal our present peace.”

“Smart philosophy, Highness,” Lisle said and Fale bowed her head.

“Hey, you didn’t complain,” Keron said.

“Our baby’s growing up,” Lisle teased.

“Yeah, I guess she is.” Keron had a strange look on his face.

They finished Fale’s laundry and washed Keron’s by lunchtime.

“Where’d Izzy go?” Keron asked.

“She said she had things to do. She’ll be at lunch,” Fale said.

They ate soup, salad, pizza and a lemon meringue pie for lunch.

“Keron, can I talk to you?” Izzy asked on their way back to the laundry room.

“Sure,” he said. “I’ll be there in a minute guys.”

Fale and Lisle went ahead and started folding Fale’s clothes on the big table. Keron entered a few minutes later.

“Is everything all right?” Fale asked.

Keron looked distracted. “Oh yeah, Izzy just wants to meet with me after dinner tonight in her room.” He put a load of clothes in the dryer.

“Why do you look so far away?” Fale asked Keron.

“She’s not usually so formal. We meet all the time. I wonder if I’ve done something wrong to upset her,” he said. Lisle choked back a laugh.

“I’m sure it’s nothing like that,” Fale said.

“Did she say why she wants to see me, Fale?” he asked.

Fale felt wicked. “I can promise you, she would not confide anything to me.”

“I guess not,” Keron narrowed his eyes at Lisle.

“Don’t look at me, I’ve been with Fale.” Lisle put his hands up. Fale waited until Keron turned around and shoved her clean nightie in the bag.

Supper was a light meal of salad, a cheese tray, smoked tuna, and a variety of rolls. There were chocolates for dessert. Fale ordered a bottle of wine and sipped it, toasting the group and their voyage. To keep up the ruse, she asked Keron if he would meet with her in her room. He reminded her he had made plans with Izzy, which made Izzy smile, but said he would come to her afterwards if it wasn’t too late. Fale frowned her disappointment, but said she understood.

They speculated on the islanders and how welcoming they would be to the four Algeans.

“Do you think Everlignians look different than we do?” Izzy asked.

“Different how?” Fale asked.

“I don’t know. Not like us,” she said.

“They’re people,” Lisle said. “How different can they be?”

“We’ll find out in about four more days,” Keron said.

“I’m so excited,” Fale bounced in her seat.

“I can’t wait to stop traveling,” said Izzy.

“We still have to go all the way back, Iz.” Keron chuckled.

Keron smiled Fale’s favorite dimpled smile.

“Ick,” Izzy protested.

Fale sipped her wine. “Lisle, do you want to take this bottle up to the deck with me? Grab those chocolates.”

“Absolutely,” Lisle took the whole plate of chocolate.

“We’ll see you later. I’ll be in my room in an hour,” Fale said to Keron.

“No hurry,” Izzy said. “We’re going to talk late. He’ll probably see you at breakfast.”

Fale shrugged and picked up the wine bottle. “Let’s go, Lisle.”

They went to sit on the deck and marvel at the vastness of water in every direction as far as the eye could see. The salty spray was cooling, and Lisle pulled their chairs into the orange rays of the setting sun. Fale’s hair turned orange and her skin glowed. Lisle loved it when she sat in the sunset. He loved her in any light, but this was when she was loveliest.

“Open your mouth and close your eyes,” he directed.

She had faith in him and did so. He was tempted to kiss her, but that would abuse her trust, so he popped a chocolate on her tongue. He watched her smile in pleasure and he looked up at the sky. Why did he torture himself this way? He couldn’t help it, he loved her. The wind blew her hair around them and he tucked it behind her ear.

She poured herself another glass. “This is really good. I’m going to get fat from all this rich food and wine.”

“How long are you going to stay up here?” he asked.

“Long enough for her to make a move, and then to talk about it ad infinitum,” she laughed. “About thirty more minutes.”

Keron followed Izzy into her room. She had opened a bottle of whiskey they had purchased at Port City and poured him a glass. He accepted it gratefully and took a drink.

“What’s this about, Iz? I’ve been waiting all day.”

“Feisty, huh?” she teased. “Drink your drink.”

He downed the glass. “Another, please.” She poured him three more fingers.

“Just a minute.” She went into the bedroom. She was gone for a minute and called him, “Could you come in here, please?”

He entered the room, but she was in the bathroom.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“I have a headache. Would you switch on the lamp and turn off the overhead? You can sit on the bed. I’ll be right out.”

“No problem.” He did as she asked and waited on the edge of the bed.

“Okay, I have a surprise. Close your eyes,” she said. “Are they closed?”

“Yep.” He drank from his glass, the amber liquid lighting his stomach on fire. The bed springs dipped behind him and soon Izzy’s hands were rubbing his shoulders and manipulating the stiff muscles in his back. Keron made a long, low sound of gratification. He tilted his head forward and she massaged his neck with her thumbs.

She lifted up to her knees and pressed against his back, sliding her hands down his chest, squeezing and using her fingernails. The whiskey made him disoriented enough not to question her motives, but when she wrapped her arms around his stomach from behind and kissed his neck, Keron asked, “Izzy, what are you doing?”

“Lovemaking,” she spoke softly.

“Izzy—” He turned to face her.

Taking his cue as positive, she held his face and kissed him, tilting her head and giving him the opportunity to deepen the kiss. But Keron put his hands on her shoulders and stood up. Izzy knelt on the bed in a pretty matching bra and panty set that left little to the imagination, a hurt look on her face.

“You don’t want me?”

All he could see was Fale’s disappointed face.

“Izzy, we’re friends. You needed me,” he said.

“I need you now,” she said bitterly. “I’m the one who deserves you. Fale has never appreciated you like I have.”

“Izzy, I don’t love you,” he sputtered.

“You will. I love you enough. Just don’t go back to her,” she pleaded.

“I love her, Iz,” he said.

“So, does Lisle, you imbecile. She’s playing with you, can’t you see?” she bit out.

“What happened to you, Izzy?”

“I woke up and started seeing Fale for who she is,” she said.

“Who is that?” he asked.

“A completely worthless and ineffective leader, who is still just a spoiled teenager thinking she’s more important than she is. I know you feel the same way. I’ve seen how you treat her,” Izzy snapped.

“Goodnight, Izzy.”

“Keron, wait. I didn’t mean it. I was just mad. Don’t go.” Tears spilled down her cheeks.

“I need to think, Izzy,” he said.

“You’re not going to her?” she sniffed.

“I don’t know yet.” He went to the sitting room, poured himself another glass, downed the shot and left.

Keron walked the upper deck. How had he been so blind? Lisle had tried to warn him. Fale had probably told the truth. Oh no. Fale. She must think he didn’t care. They had grown apart over the last few weeks, though. Was that her choice? Was it because of Izzy or because of him? Did he really treat Fale the way Izzy thought? If so, did he feel that way?

What kind of man loved one woman and strung along another? He had grown to care for Izzy in the past month. He hated rejecting her. Keron didn’t want the girls to fight, but he certainly didn’t want them to fight over him. One would have to win, and one would lose. He didn’t want Izzy to be hurt that way, and he realized Fale had probably been feeling like the loser ever since Izzy’s first lie.

He’d called her a liar. If he really loved her, could he have done it?

So many questions flooded Keron’s mind. He couldn’t think. Eventually the only thought that went through his head was, *I can’t deal with this*. He had told Fale he would talk to her tonight, but he just couldn’t. He owed her the courtesy of an explanation, though, so she wouldn’t wait up on him. Keron walked the halls with purpose and knocked on Fale’s door.

She answered with a huge smile and a laugh.

“Hi Keron. Won’t you come in?” She stepped out of the way.

“Not tonight, Fale. I came by to tell you that I’m going to bed,” he said.

“Is something wrong?” Concern was etched on her brow.

“No. Yes. I need a few days to think,” he said.

“We’re docking in a few days. You’re making me anxious. What’s going on?” she asked. She was afraid he’d chosen Izzy and was conflicted about telling her. “Just tell me.”

“I can’t, Fale. Look, give me two days and we’ll talk, okay? Hopefully I’ll have what I want to say by then,” he said.

“Do I have a choice?” she asked.

“No.”

“Then I’ll wait,” she said, defeated.

“Thanks, Fale.”

“Don’t thank me yet,” she joked nervously.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“Has Izzy gone to bed?” she asked.

“Yes,” he answered and Fale’s heart fell and shattered in a million pieces. If he’d put her to bed, then they’d... she couldn’t think about it.

“Goodnight, Keron.” She wanted to tell him she loved him, but if he’d been with Izzy, he was lost to her now.

“Sleep well, Fale.”

Chapter 11

The next morning Fale heard a knocking at her door. Lisle stood there agitated.

“Why weren’t you at breakfast?” he asked. “Is Keron here?”

“No, wasn’t he at breakfast?”

“No, and neither was Izzy. What happened last night?” he asked. Fale ushered him in and closed the door.

“I have no idea, but I think Izzy’s plan worked. Keron came over here to tell me he was going to bed and to give him two days before he could talk to me,” she said.

“What the what?” Lisle said. “I don’t understand.”

“You and me, both,” she said.

“Do you want me to go talk to him?” Lisle asked.

“No, let him think about what he wants to say and give me time to adjust to my disintegrated heart,” she said.

“I’m so sorry, Fale.”

“I know you are. I know where you are if I need you, but I have to be alone for a while.”

“I understand,” he held his arms open she walked into them. He cradled her head to his chest, and she cried softly into his shirt.

She looked up at him with shining olive eyes and said, “Why me, Lisle?”

He pushed the hair back from her face with his hands and bent to gently kiss her soft pink lips. She cried harder.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t mean to confuse you. You were just so... I couldn’t help myself.” She continued to cry. He hugged her again and stroked her back. “Shhh, It’s okay, Fale. It’ll be okay.”

She clutched the back of his shirt. When she could catch her breath, she let go of him.

“Sorry, Lisle. I think I snotted on your shirt.” She laughed pitifully. He loved her sense of humor.

“I was thinking of turning it into a hankie, anyway,” he said. She laughed and sniffed.

“Let me get a tissue. I’ll be right back,” she said.

When she returned, Lisle was looking down. “Fale, I really am sorry--”

“We won’t talk about it,” she said. “I’m not mad. You’re always here for me and I’m not there for you, not like you need me to be.” She cried again.

“Don’t cry for me, Fale. You make me happy just being my friend. Really, you do,” he promised.

She wiped her face. “See why I should be alone? I’m not fit company.”

“You’re full of it.”

“I suppose you could do a puzzle here, but I’m not up to talking much,” she said.

“Are you writing in your journal?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Good,” he said. “I’ll go get my puzzle and be right back. I suppose you want to have coffee in here, too?”

“Yes,” she said. “I’m not up to seeing them.”

“I don’t blame you. I’ll get our coffee and bring it with me,” he offered.

“You’re the best, Lisle.”

“I know.” He smiled. She gave him a tearful grin.

Fale spent the rest of the day in her sitting room with Lisle and he got them food “to go” from the galley, claiming she was ill. He also carried in a small box.

“What’s that?” she asked.

“Some guy on the crew sent these to you. Asked me to deliver them.” Lisle held out the box.

Fale took it. “What did he look like?”

“A guy my height, I guess, a little shorter. Shaggy hair, grimy hat.”

Fale groaned. “It’s Stu.”

“Who’s Stu?”

“Just one of the engine workers who pays too much attention to me. I think he’s harmless.”

“I would say we need to tell Keron, but he’s choosing to be team Izzy right now.” Lisle sighed.

“What I need is a plan of my own. One where I’m not dependent on anyone,” Fale said to herself.

“What do you mean?” Lisle looked up from his puzzle.

“Well, I need to think beyond Keron and Izzy. I am supposed to be the leader, right? I need to think like a leader. What if Keron and Izzy decide not to continue on with us?”

“Of course they will, Fale—” Lisle reached out to touch her arm, but Fale shook her head and continued.

“I have to have a contingency plan, Lisle. First, I need to meet the island people, find out what they know about the machine, then go and get it. Luckily, we have our gear with us in case we have to go far to find it, I got the feeling I was pretty high up the mountain when I saw the cave in my vision. We could manage it, Lisle. It’ll be much harder than coming down the last

one, but I have new muscles.” Fale laughed, flexing her foot.

“I’ve gained a few, too.” Lisle agreed.

“Once we find the machine, I’m hoping it has self-explanatory buttons on it, or whoever left us that symbol carved on the stone, carved us some understanding of the machine. All I know is I turn it on.” Fale lifted the key from the strip around her neck, and let it drop.

“We’ll figure it out.”

She smiled at Lisle. “I have no doubt. I guess we load it on some horses or something and bring it back down the mountain, onto the boat, take it back to Algea and get it up to the mages’ estate. If nothing else, I know that Sage will have a plan for it. She’s probably known how to use it all along.”

“Wouldn’t surprise me.” He laughed with her.

“I don’t know what happens then. I don’t have a plan of action after that.” Fale spread her hands. “I guess it kind of depends how the machine works. It must get those people back to Alloy City, but where will it send them? Izzy’s right, I don’t have any idea what I’m doing yet. I need to get pro-active. I must plan my destiny and run it, instead of riding it like a wave. Maybe that doesn’t make sense.”

“It does. And by the time your people come back, they will look to you for answers. We know Gasten wants to control them, so offer them their freedom, like you’ve said. They will be thankful to you. Maybe they will want you to retake your throne.”

“I guess I can’t expect them to know what to do any more than I do.” She sighed and leaned back in her seat. “Maybe knowing what to do, will make me the leader I want to be. I will need to find somewhere for all those people to stay. It would be so convenient if the castle was there, I’m sure we could find room in it for so many.”

“Don’t wish for unlikely things, let’s plan what we know,” Lisle said.

“You know, if we somehow had help from Keron and Izzy, all this would be easier.”

“He still loves you, Fale. I’ll bet they surprise us.”

“I hope so, Lisle. I hope so.”

On the second day of being sequestered to her room, the ship doctor came to call on her to see if she needed medication. Fale assured the doctor she was feeling much better and would emerge that evening. Keron had said two days, after all, and it would have been two days by that night.

The doctor also went to see Izzy and remarked that three of his four passengers were bedridden. Izzy realized that they weren’t all having fun without her. She was ecstatic that the others were suffering as she was. In fact, she felt much better. If Keron hadn’t gone back to Fale, he must be taking things seriously. He was taking this harder than his break up with Fale. She was delighted.

Fale must be wondering what was going on, or he had rejected her, too. Izzy nearly clapped her hands. She was still in the game. Keron was any woman’s man, she just had to win

him back. Izzy threw off her covers. She would make a grand appearance at dinner tonight. If Keron wasn't there, she would take him some soup; in case he really was ill. Maybe she would stay and play some cards, talk a while, apologize.

When the doctor mentioned to Keron that his female passengers must have caught the same illness, he was surprised. Neither one had left their rooms in two days? He could see Izzy being embarrassed, but what was the matter with Fale? He worried about her.

Had he said anything to give her a clue to what was going on? Just that he couldn't tell her what was happening for two days, that he had to think, and he was going to bed and Izzy had gone to bed... Did she think she think he and Izzy were together? The last time he had needed to think, it was because he was leaving her for her own good. What would she think this time? Of course, she thought he and Izzy were together.

In two days, Keron hadn't decided what to say to either woman or how to fix the problem of too many people, too many tempers, too many hearts. He knew one thing though, he had to tell Fale he and Izzy were not in love. She deserved that. He got up, showered, shaved and got dressed in Fale's favorite blue shirt and khaki's, then went to dinner.

The galley was full of people bustling about. Keron found his table by the white hair he saw in his dreams. She wore deep blue and she smiled, but her eyes were grief-stricken. Keron felt the weight of his responsibility and almost backed out but forced himself to walk forward. She looked up and saw him and her smile faltered, but she replaced it with determination.

Her chin went up and she tucked her hands in her lap.

"Keron," she said. "Have you been sick?"

"Something like that." He took his seat. "Will you walk the deck with me after dinner tonight?"

"If you wish," she said.

"I do."

Lisle drank his water. "Do you want wine, Fale?"

"What's for dinner?" she asked.

"Cod," Lisle said.

"White wine, then," she said.

"You know wines?" Keron asked.

"A little," she said. "Enough for etiquette."

"What does that mean?" Keron asked.

"Absolutely nothing, Keron. Just conversation." She sighed.

"Sorry," he said. "I'm a little jumpy."

"A little?" Lisle asked.

"Shut up, Lisle."

“Did you guys wait on me? That is so sweet.” Izzy breezed in cheerfully.

Fale sighed into her napkin.

Izzy touched Keron’s shoulder, then Lisle’s and sat between them. “What’s for dinner?”

“Cod,” Lisle said drily.

“Great, I’m starved. Sorry I’ve been absent. I feel much better. Wait, weren’t you two ill, too? Looks like you might still be under the weather, Fale,” she said. Lisle ordered the wine.

“I think I’ve lost my appetite.” Fale folded her napkin and laid it on her plate, scooting her chair back.

“Wait.” Keron put his hand out. “Please stay.”

“You need to eat something,” Lisle said. “You haven’t had anything all day.”

“Fine.” Fale put her napkin back on her lap.

They ate their dinner in courses; salad first, then cod, and finally carrot cake. The conversation was stilted, but Izzy chattered on easily, to the dismay of everyone at the table. Fale sucked down glass after glass of white wine. After dinner they all stood. Lisle lifted Fale out of her chair.

“Keron?” Izzy said expectantly.

Keron looked at Lisle. “I’ve got her,” he said.

Lisle put his mouth by Fale’s ear. “Do you want to go with him?” She nodded. “Are you sure?”

“Yes. I wanna hear what he hasta say,” she slurred.

“Okay. She’s all yours,” Lisle said to Keron next to him, too low for the girls to hear, “But if you hurt her any more, I’m going to find a way to cause you pain.”

Keron looked at Lisle with reluctant respect and nodded, then took Fale’s arm from him.

“Keron?” Izzy said. “What are you doing?”

“None of your business, Izzy,” he said.

Lisle coughed away a laugh at Izzy’s stunned expression. “I’ll walk you back to your room, Iz.”

“I want to know where they’re going,” she said.

“You heard the man,” he smiled.

Keron walked Fale up to the deck above the bridge. He sat her in a chair and stood at the railing looking out at the water trying to decide how to open the conversation. When he turned around, Fale was glowing from the sunset. She looked ethereal. Her dainty feet were clad in white sandals and crossed under her, her graceful hands clasped in her lap, and her delicate features cast down. He remembered the way that no matter how he felt about her, in her presence, he was a better man.

“Fale.”

She looked up at him.

“I need to tell you something,” he said.

“I already know,” she said.

“What do you know?”

“Izzy saw me washing my red nightgown. I knew what she was going to do. I lied to you. I just didn’t expect you to- to- stay with her,” she said.

Keron thought about what she’d said. “You think we- Fale. I turned her down. Why do you think I’m so conflicted?”

“But you said she was in bed, I thought you- oh my. Wait. What’s so conflicting? Do you love her?”

“No,” he said. She wasn’t convinced.

“But you don’t love me anymore,” she guessed.

“I don’t know how I feel, Fale. I don’t know what kind of man I am. I don’t know if you love me or if I’m worthy of your love. I hate rejecting you and I hated rejecting Izzy. I’m having a really hard time with that.”

“She seems to be taking it pretty well,” Fale muttered.

“I don’t want you two at each other’s throats anymore, either,” he said.

“You say that like it’s my fault. I told you, I never lied. She did. She said she was going to steal you and to stay out of her way. You know what, if you can’t believe me, maybe you should go think some more. I have been nice to her while she’s been nothing but mean to me.” Fale couldn’t help the angry ocean of tears clouding her eyes. She swiped furiously at them, but they kept coming.

“Hey...” He knelt in front of her. “You’re right. I know you. You’re beautiful, honest, strong, kind and smart. If you say it, I believe you. Can you give me time to work through the rest of it? I didn’t realize Izzy was so false.”

“You still want there to be an us?” she asked.

“Sprout, that’s up to you,” he said.

“It’s not time yet,” she said dejectedly. “I haven’t found the machine.”

She felt better, but something was missing. Izzy still held a piece of him that she didn’t have access to. They walked arm in arm in the moonlight, each lost in their own thoughts. Keron walked Fale back to her room and lightly kissed her forehead.

“I’ll see you at breakfast, okay?” he said.

“Sure.”

For reasons unknown to her, Fale cried herself to sleep that night. She woke up groggy and light sensitive. Putting on her workout gear, she used the fitness room’s machines and took a shower. Dressed in her brown shorts and a gauzy white top matching her sandals, she made two

French braids down her back. Checking herself in the mirror, she pinched her cheeks for some color and left for the morning meal.

Lisle and Keron sat around apple flatcakes, eggs and sausage with orange juice. They ate better on the ship than they did at home. Fale never got fresh meat or eggs in Alloy City. The men were in an animated conversation, so Fale didn't announce herself; she sat and loaded her plate with food.

"But that many nautical miles could take days, right?" Keron asked.

"Not necessarily," Lisle said. "If we sail at our current speed, and the ocean conditions remain the same, we could get there tomorrow."

"What?" Fale asked.

"Everligne," Lisle said. "If you go up to the bridge you can see the mountains."

"So, this is our last night on the ship?" Fale asked.

"Probably," he said.

The men continued to talk about sailing and prime conditions, but Fale could only think about one thing. *I have one night to fix this.* She decided she was foolish to spend one more minute away from Keron trying to think of a solution. If she didn't want to lose him forever, she needed to spend time with him.

"Keron? Will you do me a favor?" she asked.

Both men stopped and stared at her. "What is it?" Keron asked.

"Will you spend this last day with me?" she asked.

"We'll be coming back on the ship- ouch, Lisle. Oh. Yeah," Keron said as Lisle kicked him.

Her eyes were downcast. "You don't have to."

"Sure, I will."

She was dying for him to call her Sprout, call her Sweetheart.

"Thanks," she smiled.

"So, as I was saying, gulls can fly hundreds of miles from shore whereas the pelican flies twenty..." Lisle droned on.

They had a long, leisurely meal and Lisle said, "We should do any laundry we have now. Who knows if we'll see another machine 'til we're back on the boat."

"You're right," Keron said. "I'm so tired of that room. Fale, do you want to do laundry first and get it out of the way?"

"Sure," she said cheerfully.

Fale walked back to her room and picked up her pajamas, dirty clothes and towels. She sorted them on the bed, then shoved them into her canvas bag. Grabbing her book, her journal and a pen, she took her laundry supplies down the hall. The laundry room had become their bonding place. Lisle was already there and starting a load.

“Hope you’re not mad,” he said.

“Why would I be mad?” she asked.

“I know you wanted to be alone with Keron.”

“It’s not that. I just want to be with him again,” she said. She explained quickly the conversation from the night before.

“He turned her down?” he asked.

“Mmm hmm.”

“Why was she acting so happy, then?”

“If you ask me, she hasn’t given up,” she said.

“I believe you,” he replied.

“Do you think you can keep her busy for me this evening?” she asked.

“I can try,” he said.

Fale left the washroom for a drink and came back with two bottles of iced tea, handing one to Keron.

“Thank you,” he said.

“Why do you look so surprised? I did things for you all the time before Izzy...” she trailed off.

“I know.” He winced. “Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize. You see it though, right? The truth? She manipulated you,” Fale said.

“She’s a good person, Fale. You cared about her once, too,” Keron said.

“Fale’s a better person. She would never lie to someone’s face and try to steal them from someone they love,” Lisle said. “Izzy has been awful behind your back.”

“Is that true, Fale? She was so nice in front of me, was she unkind when I wasn’t around?” he asked. She hesitated. “I’ll believe you,” he added.

“It’s true,” she said.

Keron nodded and flexed his jaw. Lisle switched his laundry from one machine to the other. “Izzy’s obviously a sore subject, so why don’t you two talk about something else?” Lisle said. “What’s your favorite memory together?”

Fale smiled. “What’s yours?” she asked Keron.

He thought. “You first.”

“Making magic,” she blushed. “Now you.”

“The night I asked you to be my wife,” he said. They gazed into each other’s eyes.

“You guys know I’m here, right?” Lisle joked.

“Shut up, Lisle,” they said together.

They took coffee in the conference room, where Izzy joined them. She was a little less forward upon arrival, not touching anyone.

“Hey everyone. What’s up?”

“Seagulls, apparently,” Fale sipped her hot coffee.

“Are we close to land?” she asked.

“Not really,” Lisle explained. “You see, seagulls can—”

Fale stopped his diatribe. “What he means is, we should get there tomorrow.”

“Oh.” Izzy sat and handed her cup to Keron. “Would you pour me some?”

“Sure.” He added the appropriate amounts of cream and sugar and handed it back to her.

“Thanks.” She took the cup, touching his hand. Fale stiffened. Izzy hadn’t given up by a long shot.

Fale took Keron’s other hand and squeezed it. She smiled at him and watched his head swivel in confusion. He still doubted that Izzy had used him. Poor idiot, he didn’t know what to think. Fale would have to find a way to help him. She whispered in Lisle’s ear and he nodded.

“You know, it makes me nervous when you two whisper,” Keron chuckled.

Fale smiled a bright white smile. “Are you about ready to finish the wash?” she asked.

“Ugh.” Izzy stuck out her tongue. “Again? Didn’t we just do laundry?”

“They probably won’t have electricity on the island,” Lisle said. “We may not see another washer ‘til we get back. Wanna wash your clothes in the river again?”

“We have to camp again, don’t we?” she asked.

“Yep,” said Keron.

“We’re going to the mountains,” said Fale.

“I guess I’ll do mine, too,” Izzy conceded.

Everyone rose, “Izzy could you wait a minute, please?” Fale asked.

Izzy’s eyes narrowed. “Sure.”

Lisle walked out the door, followed by Keron and it shushed closed for the most part. “What is it?” Izzy sneered. “I don’t have time to play games.”

“You’re the one playing the game, Izzy,” Fale said calmly. “You’re the one who told me you were going to steal Keron from under my nose.”

“So? Do you see him with you now, Your entitled Highness? He’s mine. Is that all you stopped me for? Because I have things to do.”

“How could you lie to his face if you loved him? How could you manipulate him?” Fale asked.

“He wanted to be needed so bad that when you didn’t need him, he saw what he wanted to.

It's his own fault. But now we're in love, so it doesn't matter how it started. You're just bitter and jealous," Izzy answered.

"I am jealous. Of every minute you spend with him," Fale said.

"Oh, boo hoo. Go cry buckets. You still get to be a queen and you still have Lisle who we both know you don't deserve, either. He'll make you happy; and if I'm lucky, someone will steal him, too," Izzy laughed.

"You're mean, Izzy. You were never this mean," Fale said.

"Yes, I was, just not to you. I never had to fight this hard for what I wanted before, and you weren't the one in my way. Like I said, give me a life without you in it, and maybe someday things will change," Izzy said.

"I'm not sure I want them to anymore, Iz. I'm sorry. I'm not mad at you and I forgive you for everything. I feel... bad for you," Fale said.

"Why would you feel bad for me? I have single-handedly destroyed you." She looked so proud of herself.

"No reason," Fale answered, smiling. Izzy stalked to the door and into the hall, right into Keron's muscled chest. His expression only showed a portion of his wrath. She turned and ran down the hall.

"Fale," he said angrily.

"Yes?" She was nervous, she had been nice, but had she said something wrong? She walked over to him and he grasped her neck firmly with two hands. She was afraid. He tilted up her jaw with his thumbs and looked her in the eye.

"Forgive me," he said. "She's right. I wanted you to need me—"

"Hush." Her voice was soft. "If I can forgive Izzy, don't you think I can forgive you?"

"Did I mention you're patient and merciful?"

"No, but you can make a list when we get home, so you never forget again," she said. Fale looked around Keron to the lanky gentleman leaning up against the wall studying his thumbnail. "Thank you, Lisle. I owe you one."

"This one almost counts as two, don't you think?" Lisle said.

"Two what?" Fale asked.

"Kisses?" Lisle joked.

"Lisle," Keron drew his name out in low threatening growl.

"Oh look, the beast is back. I missed ya, buddy." Lisle slapped him on the back and ran.

"Come back here, dink," Keron called.

Fale laughed lightly, feeling like she'd just been given her heart's desire, when in fact, she had. Keron wrapped an arm around her shoulders and guided her down the hall, and right into Stu's arms.

Chapter 12

“Whoa little lady.” He took her by the arms.

“Stu? What are you doing here?” She watched his eyes linger on the key around her neck.

“I heard you was doing better. Did you get my gift?” He was sweating again. “You didn’t like them?”

“The chocolates were delicious, thank you. I appreciated the thought.”

“Maybe we could talk somewhere?”

Keron stepped closer. “Why would you need to talk to Fale?”

“Oh, I just admire her. I’m only a poor engine worker, but I wanna be her friend.” His eyes narrowed. “It’d make me daughter so happy if’n I talked to the princess.”

Keron relaxed his arm around Fale. She didn’t trust the man, but she felt better knowing he was trying to delight his child. Surely, he was harmless.

“I guess we could talk,” she said. She had to trust people. This man had done nothing but be nice to her, dance with her, and send her a gift. She didn’t want to be prejudiced. “I can talk to you in my sitting room.”

“I’ll see you at lunch. But, only if you’re okay?” Keron touched her shoulder.

“Sure.” She smiled at Keron and led the way for Stu.

Fale was almost to her door, when her arm was pulled roughly to the side and her body slammed against the wall. Her head ricocheted off the surface and her sight blurred. A utility closet opened next to her and she was shoved in.

“What are you doing?” she sputtered.

Stu backed her into a wall of shelves. His eyes were glittering with hatred and his hands were tying hers together with a piece of twine.

“I know you’s didn’t eat the chocolate, cause you’s still alive.” He spewed foul breath over rotten teeth and laughed in her face. “I hate talkin’ fancy like you stuck-ups.”

“Well, you got me. What are you going to do now? You can’t keep me in the closet. We’re on a boat, you can’t go anywhere. And if you kill me, you won’t find the machine.” She felt pretty smug.

“If’n I kills you, we still gonna land on the island. Then we knows we can find it. Gasten seen your vision, too. Didn’ ya think he’d be a step ahead of ya? I only gotta send the message with the location and at least one o’ your fingers to show the Source Wizard. Then I gets me a new promotion.”

Fale felt hot and sticky. Her sweat glands were working overtime. She hadn’t thought of a wizard mole. She kicked herself. And if they didn’t want her alive anymore, she was really in trouble.

“So, how are you going to do it?” she asked.

“Wouldn’t ya like ta know.” He grinned at her, obviously proud of himself.

“If I’m going to die, you might as well tell me. Unless you don’t actually have a plan,” she taunted him.

“Yes, I do.” He stopped fumbling in his pockets and looked at her gravely. “I’m gonna tie you up, knock ya out, and come back later to take ya down to the engine room. It’s too loud to hear ya screamin’ down there. I get to take my time with yous.”

Fale felt the vomit claw up her throat.

Stu poured liquid from a bottle into a dirty handkerchief and held it up to her mouth and nose. She shook her head violently, but nothing would stop the fuzzy warmth that enveloped her. She dropped to the floor.

Not surprisingly, Izzy took lunch in her rooms. Lisle and Keron had salad and clam chowder with biscuits. They ate quickly and went up to the bridge to check on their progress toward the island. Lisle was fascinated by the calculations of horizon to height ratios or something similar. Keron wasn’t listening, he was looking at fuzzy snow-capped mountains; two were peaked and one was rounded.

“Those are the ones from Fale’s vision.”

“How can you tell?” Lisle asked.

“I can’t yet, but I’ll bet you ten credits the rounded mountain resembles a buffalo like she said.” Keron said.

The captain laughed. “We’ll see if she’s right.”

“Shall we sit on the deck and read?” Lisle looked at Keron.

“I’m going to find Fale.”

“She’s probably writing in her journal.” Lisle juggled his book and puzzle.

“I’ll ask her if she wants to join us.” Keron walked out.

He went below and checked her room. He looked in the conference room at the bookshelves. There was no one in the laundry room, the weight room, or the pool.

First on the to-do list was get Lisle’s involvement.

“It’s a flipping boat. Where could she be?” Keron paced the deck.

“Did you check Izzy?”

“As crazy as it seemed, yes, and she wasn’t there,” Keron said.

“When did you see her last?”

Keron stopped. “With some guy from the ship. I think he said he was from the engine room.”

Lisle’s eyes widened. “Do you think he could be Gasten’s?”

“I do now.” Keron lifted Lisle up by the hand. “Let’s go down to the engine room.”

When they got down there, Stu was busy working on an oily joint. Keron walked up to him and grabbed the front of his shirt.

“Where is she?” he demanded.

“What’re ya talkin’ about?” Stu asked, remaining calm.

“Where is Fale?”

“Ah, Mrs. Palmquist? I left her upstairs. She must still be there.” He smiled crookedly and looked down at his shirt bunched up in Keron’s hand.

“Where upstairs?” Keron growled.

“In the hallway. I swear!” The man yelled out as Keron’s hand twisted the shirt to choke him.

“Hey now, what’s going on here?” The shift foreman approached the men.

“Just a misunderstandin’,” Stu offered.

Keron reluctantly let go of his shirt. “We can’t find Fale and I think this scumbag knows where she is.”

The foreman put an arm in front of Stu. “Unless you know he’s involved, you’re on a witch hunt. And we have work to do. Go look somewhere else.”

“But—” Lisle began.

“She’s not here. Go.”

The only thing they could think of was to go to Captain Kit.

“How long has she been gone?” the captain asked.

“For a few hours.” Keron paced the control room. “I left her. I left her with a man I don’t know. How could I be so stupid?”

He looked like he was about to punch the wall. So, Captain Kit stood in front of him.

“You can’t expect the unexpected,” Lisle said.

“Isn’t that kind of my job?” Keron was stressing out, pulling his short hair into spikes.

“I will alert the ship. We’ll all look for her. Hopefully, she just found a corner to relax in.” The captain held a microphone to his mouth. “All hands in search of passenger Mrs. Palmquist. Young woman, white hair, five feet tall. Find, recover, report. Repeat, all hands in search of...”

There was a scatter of feet as people checked the corridors and cubby spaces.

“Let’s split up,” Keron said. “Lisle, you take the top decks. Captain Kit, can you find Stu in the engine room? I’ll go back to her room and start from there.”

“Yes sir,” Lisle said.

“Sure,” the Captain agreed.

Keron spun and ran for the stairs. He passed the place he’d last seen her and slowed down.

He heard a heavy thunk. Then another one. He pressed his hand to the wall and felt the vibration of the next one. He moved along the wall, trailing his fingertips until he came to a locked door.

“Fale?” he called.

The noise was repeated, faster this time.

“Are you okay?” He pulled on the handle with his valezsan alloy arm but did nothing more than bend the handle. He thought he heard her voice, but it was muffled.

“Just a minute, honey.” He kicked the door with his left foot to gauge its sturdiness, then planted the boot of his valezsan leg right through the panel. He reached through and unlocked the door.

“Fale!” He rushed to her, gagged, tied and bent at an uncomfortable angle.

She breathed a sigh of relief and laid her head against the wall, wincing against the parts sore from banging. He smiled at her and pulled out his pocket-knife to cut free her hands and feet.

He was crouched on the ground in front of her when he felt the sole of a man’s boot against his side. Keron lost his balance. Fale’s arms broke free and she grabbed the knife. Stu stood in the doorway and advanced toward Keron.

“Get him, Keron,” she said.

Keron jumped up with a fighter’s reflex and threw a punch, but Stu ducked under it and jabbed Keron in the liver. Keron let out a grunt of pain. He looked down to check on Fale. She had almost cut through the layers of twine around her ankles. Stu advanced again.

Keron waited for him to come closer and feinted with his left side, hitting him solidly with his right. Stu was no match for the full weight of Keron’s valezsan arm. He flew out the door of the closet and against the wall across the hall. Fale jumped up.

“Leave him to me.”

Keron picked up the twine from a nearby shelf. “I was going to tie him up.”

She walked over to Stu as he roused and pulled his body up by the front of his shirt. She punched his face. Hard. How dare Gasten send people after her? As far as she was concerned, he was the embodiment of evil and she couldn’t wait to meet him and kick his magical ass. Stu squirmed and she punched him again. Some of the anger left her.

“Go ahead and tie him up,” she said.

But when she rose, Stu scrambled out from under her and down the hall before they could react.

“Go! Go!” Keron waved Fale forward and they ran after him.

They ran up flights of stairs to the deck where Stu jumped up on the railing. Fale skidded to a stop and held her arms out.

“Hey. Think about this. There is nowhere for you to go. If the fall doesn’t kill you, you’ll drown. Come back,” she said.

Keron walked toward Stu with the twine in his hands.

“I’m not comin’,” Stu said. “If’n they take me back, I’m dead. Unless I send the location- and yous not gonna let me. I’m takin’ my chances out there.” He pointed out toward the open ocean.

“Don’t be crazy.” Keron was almost to him.

“I ain’t.” Stu threw himself off the guardrail and plummeted into the water below.

Chapter 13

Fale rushed to the side and looked over to see Stu's head pop up above the water. He struggled in the wake of the ship, but as he drifted out of sight, she watched him fight to remain alive.

She grabbed the nearest flotation device, which happened to be a life jacket, and tossed it overboard. She wasn't totally heartless.

Lisle ran to them on the deck. "What happened?" he panted.

"I trusted the wrong person," Fale said.

"No, you felt a false sense of security when we should be on alert," Keron said. "It's your job to trust people. It's my job to be suspicious and protect you. If I had been doing my job, you could have trusted him, because I would have followed you."

"Don't blame yourself." She put a hand on Keron's arm.

"Take your own advice," Lisle said. "It happened. We'll keep each other safe; we'll work harder."

"I don't know about you guys, but I'm famished. I've been stuck in the closet all afternoon," Fale said. As they walked to the galley together, Keron took Fale's index finger with his, and when she smiled, he took her hand.

Their table was empty.

"I wonder if we'll see Izzy before we land," Fale said.

"I wonder if she'll get off the ship," said Lisle.

"I think everyone disembarks." Keron scratched his cheek. "But I don't know."

"She's with us, anyway," Lisle said. "She needs to get over herself. Fale forgives her so she should be fine."

"She's probably embarrassed, Lisle, give her time," Fale said.

"You're way too understanding."

"I'll be nice, but she needs to stay out of my way," Keron said. "I need a little time, too."

"We'll work it out," Fale assured.

"We need a plan of attack for when we reach the island. What are we going to do about Izzy?" Fale asked the guys.

"I'm going to let you two make the decision on this one, I'm still angry with her." Keron gathered Fale's hair together and lightly skimmed her neck, giving her goosebumps.

"I want to be mad at her, too, but I know she struggles with right and wrong," Lisle volunteered.

"The future of Effailya's followers are at stake here. We brought her along to convince her to be on our side, but I think we failed. Now, I think we should keep her with us just so she can't radio Control from the ship or something. It's too risky to leave her alone. I don't want her to

convince the island's Sage to teleport her somewhere, either. It's supposed to be a secret island. We will have to take her up the mountain with us." Fale looked at the others.

"You're right," Keron said. "As Wardsman, I need to protect us all, and I think we keep her as close to us as possible, to keep an eye on her."

"If she'll even go with us." Lisle looked back toward the cabins.

"Oh, she will. You're going to make her." Fale told Lisle.

"Me? Why me?"

"You are probably the only one of us that she will listen to right now," Keron said. "But you can let her know that if you have problems, I am happy to make her go with us by force."

"Is that necessary?" Lisle asked.

"I hope not." Keron leaned back and closed his eyes. "I really hope not."

They ate salad, bread sticks and kabobs with pork, pineapple and bell peppers. Ice cream sundaes were for dessert. Fale ate all the cherries and Keron plopped whipped cream on her nose. They all laughed.

"I want to go swimming. Are you guys coming?" Fale asked.

"You go ahead, I'm not fond of the saltwater." Lisle replied.

"Do you want to come with me?" she asked Keron.

"Yeah," he smiled. "I'll get my suit and see you there."

"Okay," she went back to her room.

The pool water was cool on Fale's skin. Wading to her waist, she pushed the water around her with her hands. Back and forth, she swiveled her cupped hands. She bent her knees and dipped her head back into the water, arching her spine, letting her arms float out to the sides.

Keron's bare feet slapped the metal, his synthetic skin making a dull sound. Holding a towel, he walked to the deep end, tossed it on a chair and dove in. Fale stood up, looking for him, but he rocketed for her feet and she screamed as she went under.

Fale came up sputtering and splashed Keron in the face, his dimpled smile infecting her. He put his hands around her waist and drew her close, sliding them up to her shoulders.

"Finally, alone," he said.

"But not in private," she said, ducking out of his arms and getting out of the pool.

She sashayed to the deep end and dove in, doggie paddling in wait for Keron. He chuckled and got out of the shallow end, walking down the side. Fale had time to appreciate his glorious body as he stood at the edge of the pool. His stainless-steel half lined up with his muscled side and he dove straight. Fale saw him coming up next to her and wrapped her arms around his neck.

"I like this suit." He plucked at the string holding up her top.

“I asked you before and you said no,” she accused. They swam toward the shallow end.

“I didn’t want you to wear it for anybody but me,” he said.

“Oh.” Understanding dawned on her. “So, you still liked me a little.”

“I never stopped.” He held her bottom and she wrapped her legs around him. “I just forgot for a minute how important you are to me.”

“I didn’t.”

“I know. I’m sorry. How can I make it up to you?” he asked.

“Will you hold me while I sleep? I’ve been so alone,” she said. He touched his forehead to hers.

“Of course.”

“I missed you. So much,” she said.

“I miss you, too.”

She kissed his nose. “If you grab your clothes, you can shower at my place. I’ll go first,” she suggested.

He kissed her nose too. “Sounds perfect.”

“Okay, I’m getting out. I’m cold,” she said.

“I’m right behind you.”

Fale stepped out of the water and handed Keron a towel. He flung it around her shoulders. “Mine’s down there.” He pointed to the deep end.

“I’ll go ahead, let yourself in,” she said.

Fale wrapped the towel around her waist and hurried down the hallways in her bare feet to her rooms. She went in and threw her wet towel over the back of the chair to dry. Turning the water on hot, she quickly tossed her dirty laundry in her bag and cleaned up the bedroom while the water warmed. Steam rolled from her tiny bathroom and Fale stepped into the shower to shampoo and shave. When she returned to the bedroom in a towel, Keron stood in her room, dripping.

“I didn’t want to sit on anything,” he said.

“Sorry I took forever,” she explained, “it’s the long hair.”

“I know. I’ve washed it before,” he reminded her. Her face grew hot.

“It’s all yours.” She motioned to the bathroom.

“Thanks.” He ran his fingers along the edge of her towel, and she caught her breath. He kissed her bare shoulder. “I’ll be right back.”

“Okay,” she stuttered. He chuckled, enjoying his effect on her.

When Keron got out of the bathroom, hot from his shower, the lights were turned off except for the bedside lamp. The window was open to allow a cool breeze and the bed was turned down. In it lay Fale in her red nightgown. She was propped up on one elbow and radiating

desire.

He felt like a teenager again, nervous and excited, unknowing what she had planned, knowing she had only asked to be held. Fale patted the bed beside her. He could see how sheer her gown was and Keron's belly tightened. He took a step forward. She smiled encouragement to him, and he crawled onto the bed like a tiger stalking its prey. He pulled her down and leaned over to kiss her, but she covered her mouth.

"I still can't kiss you?" he asked.

"Not here," she tapped her lip. "You said the magic made us do it the last time, so it didn't count."

He smiled and bent to her neck, tasting the soft skin there. Fale kneaded his shoulders and skimmed her hand down his arm. Then she ran her fingernails through his hair, and down his back. They held each other all night. There was only the two of them, like twin stars set adrift in the night sky. Keron's skin was Fale's comforter and her hands were his pleasure. Every breath was a sigh; every touch a caress. The morning hours came too soon. He cradled her head with his bicep and embraced her in the red silk gown, pulling the hem down further with his other hand.

"Try to get some sleep," he said. "We have to get up in a few hours."

She kissed his chest. "Okay."

In the morning, Fale heard knocking.

"It's your door," Keron mumbled.

Fale hopped out of bed. "Coming," she called.

Lisle leaned against the door jam. "Whoa, that's some nightie."

"Eek." Fale hid behind the door. "Good morning, Lisle. What can I do for you?" she yawned.

"You are the talk of the bridge," he said.

"Why is that?" she narrowed her eyes.

"The mountain. Captain Kit flipped out. He thinks you have prescient sight," he said.

"What does that mean?"

"That you know events before they happen," he explained.

"I do," she said.

"Well, he believes you now," he laughed. "You should have bet him the ten credits."

"What time is it?" Fale asked.

"Eight-fifteen; you missed breakfast. I assume Keron's in there?" He nodded his head toward Fale's bedroom.

Fale shifted, "Nothing happened."

"It's none of my business, Fale."

“Have you seen Izzy?” she asked.

“Nope, I expect I’ll have to have a little chat with her before we dock,” he said.

“When will we get there? I still hear the engine running.”

“We’re close. Captain says by lunch.” Lisle smiled. “Are you ready?”

“No.” She took a deep breath. “I feel like I’ve been running uphill all the way so far- now I’m ready to rest. Then again, I’ve been wanting to move forward while we are stuck on the boat. Now it’s time to climb another mountain. Sheesh.”

“You’ll do fine, you have stamina and grace. You’re going to make a great queen,” he praised her.

“Stop it,” she smiled.

“What’s going on, Lisle?” Keron stood in the doorway to Fale’s bedroom.

“Not much. Just braggin’ on your girl,” he said.

“Nice. Did we miss breakfast?”

“Yep,” Lisle answered.

“Damn.” Keron yawned. “I hope they have coffee cake today.”

“You two need to get dressed first,” Lisle said. “Then go up and see the island. I’ll meet you for coffee at ten. Be packed and ready to dock by lunch.”

“Are we eating on board, or off?” Fale asked.

“Off, if we can,” Lisle said.

“See ya, man,” Keron said.

“Bye.” Lisle waved as he turned to leave. “I can’t wait to get the machine and set these people free, so I can figure out my destiny. Something important is coming for me.”

“You’ll figure it out. See you at lunch.” Fale closed the door. Fale and Keron got ready and headed to the bridge hand in hand.

Navigations were underway in preparation for docking. Fale was going to suggest they come back another time when she was spotted.

“Captain Kit, there she is.” Fale peered around the room for the voice. Captain Kit appeared to shake her hand.

“It was here, just like your vision.”

“The mountain?” she asked.

“The island,” he said. “What else did you see?”

“I saw part of the machine and where it is,” she said warily. “Why?”

“Not many people talk about when Gryndoll sent the queen away, it was so long ago. But my family was split down the middle, and never saw each other again. I want to meet my kin,” he said. “It would have made my great grandmother happy.”

“Oh. I never thought of that,” she said.

“It’s alright, it wasn’t your fault. It was Gryndoll, but you’ll fix all that, won’t you?” he asked.

“I’ll try,” she said, feeling the weight of their survival around her neck.

“I’ve got to get to work, you’re welcome to stay, just don’t bump into anything,” Captain Kit said.

“We’ll go, but thank you,” Fale spoke for them both.

“All the people love you,” Keron said when they were outside.

“It’s not all the people I’m concerned about,” she said and looked at him pointedly.

“Fale,” Keron looked at her expectant face. “It doesn’t seem right to say it now that I’ve waited so long for the perfect moment.”

They stopped by the railing on the deck. Everligne could be seen looming in front of them like a mystery waiting to be solved.

“Say it,” she pleaded.

He felt a strand of her hair between his fingers and tucked it behind her ear, “I love you, Sprout.”

“You do?” Happy tears escaped her eyes.

“I do,” he said. “I adore you.”

“Then why has this been so hard?” she asked.

“Because we’re human.”

“I guess,” she said, turning in his arms. She watched the island chain advance inch by inch as she basked in Keron’s affection. “Look at how close the island is now. I need to pack.”

“Do you want help? We can get your stuff now and mine after tea,” he suggested.

“Sure, it’ll be fun that way,” she said. Keron took Fale’s hand and they walked to her room. He wiggled his eyebrows and she laughed.

“Unless we can think of some better way to pass the time.” She winked.

Chapter 14

The ship reached the dock about noon. Fale and Keron were waiting impatiently with the porter. Their bags and camping supplies were piled on a rolling cart. As they walked down the gangplank, they looked around at the beach. They were surrounded by curious children, tanner skinned, wider-eyed and darker haired than they were. Giggling and shy, the children waved and ran, pushing the braver ones to the front. Among them, in a long cloth wrapped around his waist and over his shoulder, stood an old man. His thin white beard stood out in contrast to the myriad of dark wrinkles on his face.

“Welcome. I am the Sage, Udalrazak.”

“I’m Keron, and this is Fale, our queen.”

“We have been expecting you. Come this way.”

“Wait for me.” They all turned to the ship to see Izzy holding Lisle’s arm and hurrying down the gangplank, like a visiting emissary. She nearly dragged poor Lisle off the boat.

Though Izzy was obviously playing a game, no one had a clue what it was yet.

“Sorry I’m late,” Izzy smiled in apology.

Lisle introduced her. “I’m Lisle, sir, and this is Izzy.”

“It is my pleasure. I am Udalrazak,” he said. “If you would follow me, I will show you to my home.”

“Thank you,” said Fale.

They walked past a huge open-sided hut full of tables with a thatched roof and a great fire pit. There was meat smoking there, covered in leaves of some kind. They walked past an area of seats circled around a fire ring, out in the open air, looking like another community meeting place.

“Do you have a large village?” Fale asked.

“We have thirty- one families in our village; the next village is a day’s walk from here, but there are over ninety settlements that we know of on the island,” Udalrazak said.

“What are those?” Izzy pointed to several large, tall towers with rotating paddles attached.

“Those are our wind machines. They are how we get our power,” Udalrazak said.

“You have power?” Lisle asked.

“Yes, for washing and cooling, but only in the public buildings shared by the people,” he answered.

They came upon wooden homes with open shuttered windows. Some were big enough to have two or three bedrooms, and some obviously had only one. Udalrazak stopped in front of a grand house decorated with shells and carved door posts.

“Is this your home?” Fale asked.

“Yes,” he said proudly. The lawn was patchy with grass and sand. The first mountain must have been a volcano at some time, because there was pitted volcanic rock dotting the landscape at its base.

Entering the habitat, they each removed their shoes at the door as Udalrazak had done. He introduced a round, pleasant looking woman in a matching style garment.

“This is my wife, Josselsyn.”

She smiled and shook each of their hands as they said their names. “We have two guest rooms. I hope you don’t mind sharing,” she said.

“We’re used to it,” Izzy said.

“I have to finish cooking. There is a feast tonight for you before the trials,” Josselsyn said.

“The trials?” Keron asked.

Udalrazak narrowed one eye at his wife and said to Fale, “Our warriors have prepared a ceremony for you to test your powers for worthiness.”

“Worthiness for what?” she asked.

“To receive the great structure,” he said.

“Structure?” she thought for a second. “Oh, we call it a machine where I come from.”

“So, what if she doesn’t pass the test?” Keron asked.

“You all must pass the test,” Udalrazak said, “but you will, as long as she is truly the queen. Let me show you to the guest rooms. We will answer questions later.”

Fale got the feeling something shady was going on, but she had nothing on which to pin her fears, so she kept quiet. Keron had the same inhibitions, but he didn’t want to needlessly worry Fale. Lisle was concerned whether the warriors’ test would be safe, and Izzy was much too interested in herself and scoping out cute natives through the windows to know what was going on.

Fale and Keron brought all their things up to their room. Udalrazak came to check on them and Fale said to him, “We brought things to trade.”

He looked through her bag and was pleased. “What would you like to trade for?”

Keron spoke, “We need food for our hike, some way to carry our supplies, and information.”

Udalrazak nodded. “I can answer your questions, supply you with food and two mules to carry your bags. Will this be a good trade?”

“Yes,” Fale traded him everything she had brought except the liquor, in case she needed to make another deal. Fale and Keron lay down for a while, not because they were tired, but because their legs felt like jelly. They were shaky and walking as if the planet was rocking, like the sea. Fale remembered Captain Kit warning her about “sea legs.” That must have been what they were feeling.

As dinner time approached, Udalrazak collected Fale and her friends and brought them to the community circle. Both the hut and the circle had fires blazing. The smoking meat was revealed to be a whole barbequed pig, and some of the women brought prepared dishes for a buffet table. The smells were pungent and Fale's mouth watered.

Udalrazak looked at Fale. "What are your questions?"

"I've got one," said Izzy. "Why didn't our Sage just teleportal us to this island? Does teleportal only go so far? Do you have to visit someplace to be able to teleportal there?"

"It was a journey the queen had to make," he said evasively, "in order to become the queen."

"Oh great, so we went through all of this because Fale had to take the journey? What about the rest of us? I didn't have to take the trip to find myself or anything, did I?" Izzy asked.

"Did you find anything out about yourself that you could learn from?" he asked her.

"No," she said emphatically.

"One can always learn from looking inside," Udalrazak said.

"We learned from her," Fale said.

Lisle asked his question quickly, before Izzy could retaliate. "Do you want to meet people from Algea?"

"We want no part of your world. It is corrupt and self-centered, and each city only produces one thing. You have cut off your own arms in order to help yourself. We would rather stay unknown and mask our island from detection."

"How do you mask it?" Lisle asked.

"Our mages blind any stranger who would sail nearby from seeing it. Unless you know it is here and land upon the shore on purpose, it is cloaked in invisibility to people who are not mages. This is how we knew the queen would see it," Udalrazak said.

"Our crew didn't believe in the island," said Fale. "But some of them saw the island like I did."

"They must have mage blood and not realize it. Many people kept quiet about their heritage after the extermination of the mages to Garrith," he said.

"You said our cities produce only one thing. Isn't that what you do?" Lisle asked.

"We don't have shipping like you do. We walk. Each village must sustain itself. We grow our own food, make our homes, our power, train our doctors, and do everything in your country in our own village," Udalrazak replied.

"Wow," Lisle said. "That's impressive. The wizards grow their own food, but nothing like all that. I hope we get to see some of it."

"Maybe on our way back, Lisle," Keron said.

Udalrazak looked at Fale. "Do you have any questions for me?"

"There is one thing I've been wondering. In my vision of the machine, there was a stone

with the queen's symbol carved in it, beside the cave. How did it get there?" Fale asked.

"When the structure, ah, machine, came to be with us, the ruling Sage investigated it and found that symbol imprinted on it. He saw in a vision two queens, one sending it here to be hidden from evil and one worthy queen who would come to claim it. No one knew when she would come. He had the stone carved centuries ago, marking the cave where the machine can be found," Udalrazak said.

"You said the ruling Sage. Do you not have kings or government? Who is your head?" Lisle asked.

"I am," Udalrazak said. "Then the village chief and his council of mages."

"I noticed you said a worthy queen," Keron said and Udalrazak smiled at him. "What does that mean?"

"Not just anyone can come and claim to be the queen and retrieve the machine. If your queen does not pass our test, you will leave here with no knowledge of this place," he said.

"You would wipe our memory?" Izzy asked. "How far back?"

"You would remember some of your voyage, but nothing else until you were back on the boat sailing home," he smiled a crooked toothed grin that did not warm Fale's heart. It left her rather cold.

"What kind of test? You said it was of my powers, but I don't have all of them yet," Fale said.

"You will be taken to a kimi where you may take your friends and use your powers. If you pass this trial, you will have one final test. You may choose a test of power or combat with one of our warriors. However, with combat, powers cannot be used at all," Udalrazak offered.

"What's a kimi, and when do I have to make this choice?" Fale asked.

"A kimi is the place of our trials. You may tell me your decision after we eat."

Everyone sat in their own thoughts. Fale wondered what kinds of tests they would have and if she should choose to accept their power test or combat strategy. Izzy liked the idea of Fale losing and being on their way home, none the wiser, with her embarrassing conversation never having to be remembered. Keron might even think he loved her again.

They were shepherded through the line to get their food. Ladies loaded Fale's plate by the spoonful with fried bananas, sweet potatoes, fish and roasted pig, coconut pudding, green papaya salad, and mango.

"Whoa," Fale said to the next woman. "I can't take any more." She came out of her daze and sat in the circle next to Keron.

"Have you decided what you're going to do?" Lisle leaned forward and asked around Keron.

"No," Fale said. "Keron, what should I do?"

"I wish I knew, Sprout. We know you can hold your own in a fight, will there be weapons? You have your swords," he said.

“I don’t want to hurt anybody,” she looked terrified. Keron laid a hand on her knee.

“We didn’t come all this way to lose. You have powers. Healing, invisibility, fire, disintegration, visions, what am I missing?” he asked.

“Projection and don’t forget my scream,” she laughed.

“How could I forget that one? You scared me to death when you got that one.” He laughed with her.

“The last few times we used the Ondah, I didn’t get a new power,” she whispered.

“Maybe you got ones we don’t know about?”

“How will I know when to use it or what it is?” she asked.

“We could ask the Sage,” he suggested.

“I’m not sure he’s on our side,” she said. “Besides, what would we say? We were making magic, but I didn’t get a power? That’s too embarrassing,” she said quietly.

He chuckled. “You have a point.”

“I guess we’ll find out some other way. Maybe I’ll spontaneously perform a miracle,” she joked, trying to take her mind off the tests.

“That’s seven powers,” Lisle interrupted. “Effailya was said to be almost limitless in her power.”

“She managed to pass herself on into a new dimension. That would use several powers at once,” Keron said.

“It could have simply been a permanent projection,” Lisle said.

“You mean, she switched places with a baby permanently? What happened to the baby?” Fale asked.

“It would be placed into her dying body. It wouldn’t have known anything, Fale,” Lisle said.

“Have they all done that?” Fale asked. “Do you think I was born or transferred?”

“It’s just a theory,” Lisle said.

“A really good one,” Keron replied.

“The point is, I don’t have the kind of power it would take to do that, or a lot of things. I can’t risk a power test and be sent back without a memory,” Fale sighed.

“So, we fight?” Keron asked.

“We fight,” she said.

After supper many of the women left to take children home. The sun had dipped below the top of the mountain hours ago, but orange-pink rays now stained the blue sky. The Sage asked Fale what her decision would be after the kimi and when she said combat, the nearly fifty spectators cheered. They must have had limited entertainment.

The Sage, in a robe of purple and carrying a gnarled staff, led the procession of people down a pathway covered in wood chips.

Fale's group was led across the mountain base to the west until they reached a structure with high stone walls. A set of thick, wooden doors was opened, and they were led inside by the Sage. The walls made passages going left and right.

"It's a labyrinth," Lisle marveled, touching the vine-covered walls. "An old one."

"Yes," the Sage agreed. "It was built centuries ago in expectant times of the queen's arrival, but you will find it the same as it always was."

"So, is the goal to find our way out? Is that it?" Fale asked.

"Not entirely," the Sage chuckled. "You will find yourself tested before you reach the doors at the other side."

"I don't like this, Fale," Keron mumbled.

"Can I sit this one out?" Izzy pleaded.

"We're all in this together." Fale attempted a pep talk. "If we stay together, there's nothing we can't do."

Izzy opened her mouth, but Lisle put his hand over it.

"Ewww. She licked me." He wiped his palm on his pants.

"Let's go," Keron waved his hand in an arc.

"Just a moment, young ones." The Sage looked at all of them. "You will remain in the kimi until you have made your way out. There are some things to know."

"Until we've made our way out? How long will this take?" Fale asked.

"You have two hours before the toxins from the poison in your food take effect. There will be an antidote awaiting your exit." The Sage grinned like he'd told a funny joke.

"What?" Keron roared.

"Excuse me?" Fale shouted. "You poisoned us?"

"Yes, yes, you must hurry," he said.

"What if we don't make it out in time?" Fale knew she was losing her temper, but how dare this man question her abilities and then try to kill them?

"Then you will not finish the trials." He simply beckoned them in and pointed left.

When the doors were closed, they heard a metal latch being secured. Fale was still sputtering in her disbelief.

"At least he showed us which way to start," Lisle said, trying to help.

"Do you seriously trust that man?" Fale yelled.

"True," Lisle's confidence deflated. Keron put an arm around Fale.

"Let's go. Fale, you lead the way and we'll help when we can." Keron took her hand and

looked at his watch. “Two hours and ticking.”

Fale shook off his hand and stomped to the left.

They got to the end of the passage only to find there was nowhere to turn, so they turned around and went back the way they had come. They passed the double doors and looked ahead. There appeared to be another dead end.

“Are you kidding me?” Fale asked. “Is there no way out?”

“Maybe there’s a secret wall that we don’t see from here?” Lisle squinted and pushed his glasses up.

“One way to find out,” Keron said, walking ahead of them. He took four steps and felt the ground give. As he jumped forward, a hole opened beneath him, but his strength had propelled him most of the way across. Keron’s upper body landed on the ground, while his legs dangled in a deep pit. He scrambled up the side and sat on the other side of the hole, breathing deeply.

“What was that?” he asked, peering inside.

“Trap door,” Lisle offered.

“How deep is it?” Izzy leaned over the other side. The sky was getting darker, making the torches on the wall leave long shadows. Keron kicked a rock into the hole and they listened until they heard a soft splash below.

“Water,” Fale whispered.

“So, does that mean this is the wrong way?” Lisle nodded ahead.

“I think so,” Keron said, “but I think I’ll check, just to make sure.” He felt his way down the corridor, testing his steps for more traps. There was nothing at the end.

“Look for knobs or pulleys,” Lisle shouted.

“I don’t see any. Check your end,” Keron answered.

Fale went back the way they’d come and found a small camouflaged panel with words in another language, and three small blocks sticking out of the wall.

“Lisle, come and read this.”

Lisle joined her and Keron took a running jump over the trap. Fale could hear Izzy mumbling to Keron, but she was too interested to see if Lisle knew the language on the panel.

“It’s Crion,” Lisle stared at rock. “I can make a rough translation.”

“What’s it say?” Izzy came up behind Lisle. “Go the other way?”

“Very funny, Izzy. It says, ‘which is more powerful, magic or the mind?’ That’s easy, magic.” He pushed the button block in.

“Wait. Lisle!” Fale pulled his shoulder.

“What?” He looked around panicked.

“Nothing, I guess. I just thought the answer was—”

Suddenly the ground beneath them shook and a wall emerged from the soil, coming swiftly

toward them.

“Push the other one, push the other one,” Izzy yelled, lifting one foot, then the other.

“Which one? There’re three,” Lisle shouted back at her. The wall was going to crush them.

“What do you mean there are three? There were only two answers, right?” Fale pushed Lisle aside to see the writing.

“I’m not sure what the other word is. It might say, ‘both?’” Lisle pointed to the box in the middle.

“That doesn’t make any sense!” Keron looked at the panel, too.

They were all standing shoulder to shoulder, facing the wall coming at them. Fale hated enclosed places. She was about to panic, so she closed her eyes.

“Push the one for mind,” she yelled.

As soon as Lisle pushed the block in, the wall behind them started to slide to the side, opening a space that turned into a corner, but the wall descending on them continued to push forward. Keron heaved the sliding rock wall open and it groaned as its gears were forced.

“Hurry,” Keron said. “Through the space. C’mon.”

Single file they each squeezed through the opening and turned the corner before they were crushed between the stones. Fale was the last one through. The moving wall was forcing her up against the end of the passage. She took shallow breaths. Lisle reached for her hand and pulled her through the opening. She took a deep breath and said to Lisle, “Next time... you read... I’ll answer.”

They came to a passageway on their right. “Do we turn, or keep going straight?” Lisle asked.

“Do we have any clues?” Fale looked both directions.

“Look for any more panels, or colors, or arrows.” Lisle ran his hands over the walls on both sides.

“What’s that?” Izzy pointed at a circle on the ground with her toe. It was in the passage to the right. She brushed the dirt from the dark circle. “I think it’s red, but it’s hard to tell in the dark.”

“Good job, Iz.” Keron patted her on the shoulder and Izzy lit up. He took the torch off the wall and held it down to see a ruby red gemstone embedded in the ground.

“So, the question now is, does the red stone mean stop or go? I don’t know how to tell.” Fale thought about it. “I have a feeling we should go this way, though.”

“Really? We’re going by your feelings now?” Izzy shook her head.

“The labyrinth was designed for Fale,” Lisle interjected before the girls could argue. “I think we should go with her on this one. Feel the way for trap doors, though.”

They inched their way down the path, feeling the ground for traps. Fale led the way, and Keron held her arm in case her weight triggered anything, confident he could pull her out. At the next junction, they followed the path with the red stone again. They came upon a few question

panels, but answered correctly, avoiding catastrophe. After carefully maneuvering several corridors, Izzy was impatient.

“This is taking too long. We are never going to make it out in two hours. I think my hands are tingling. Why don’t you just heal us now?” she asked Fale.

“If you were sick, I could heal your symptoms, but I don’t know how to do a generic healing for poison,” Fale said. “I mean, I could try, but I wouldn’t know if it worked until everyone else got symptoms.”

“Well heal me, I don’t want any symptoms. Then it won’t matter how long we’re in here,” Izzy demanded.

“Yes, it will, because Fale can’t heal herself. She needs to get out in two hours.” Lisle looked sympathetically at Fale.

“We’ll get her out,” Keron assured.

“Okay, I’ll try my healing powers on Izzy. Does anyone else want to go now?” Fale put her hands out toward Izzy and touched her shoulder.

“I’ll wait,” Keron said.

Fale did her best to block the power of the poison in Izzy’s body and she tried the same with Lisle. “Let’s get going now,” she said with a yawn. The poison only increased the fatigue from using her powers.

They walked on, twisting and turning with the pathways, until they came to a dead end.

“I thought we were going the right way...” Fale was confused and looked back the way they had come. “If red meant ‘wrong way,’ then we’ve got a lot of backtracking to do.”

“But there haven’t been any more trap doors?” Lisle tried to reason. “Um, Fale? My hands are tingling now, too.”

“Oh great, well the healing doesn’t work. I wonder if it’s an enchanted poison?” Fale held her hands up. “I could try again, Lisle.”

“That’s okay. I’m good.” Lisle smiled.

Fale started to walk back the way they had come, but a wall was rising from the ground to block her way. “Uh oh, we are stuck again. Is there another riddle, Lisle?”

“I found the panel,” Izzy crowed.

Lisle read the writing out loud. “Is the queen served, or a servant?”

“There are three blocks again. Are they labeled?” Fale asked.

“The one in the middle has the same word. I think it means ‘both.’ I’ll let you choose this time,” he said, backing away.

The wall behind them had finished rising and wooden spikes protruded through round holes all over the surface.

“Don’t want to get this one wrong, Fale.” Keron pointed to the spikes.

“Oh my stars,” Izzy inched closer to Keron.

“I know the queen is a servant, but she is served. So, I want to go with both, but that’s so easy. Are they trying to see if I hit one or the other?” Fale considered the possibilities.

“Don’t overthink it, Sprout. What if the middle block says, ‘neither?’” Keron offered.

“Oh, I hadn’t thought of that,” Lisle said. “It could be.”

“It could really say anything. Lisle doesn’t know.” Izzy screamed.

“What do you think?” Keron asked Fale.

She pushed the block that said “servant,” but nothing happened. Neither wall moved.

“I wonder if the mechanisms are rusty? The first door didn’t want to open, either.” Fale said.

“The spiky one sure didn’t have any trouble.” Keron laughed nervously.

“Maybe it’s a different set of mechanics,” Lisle offered.

“I don’t want to go near that wall.” Fale pointed to the spikes. “Keron, can you try to push this one open? I assume it slides like the rest.”

“Yeah, but which direction?” Keron asked.

They all thought of ways it could work, but no one was sure. Lisle calculated the direction they were going with the occurrence of torches and how close he thought they were to the outer wall and suggested the door slide right. After heaving for a few minutes, Keron’s hands began to numb.

“Fale? My arm is tingling.” Keron was visibly sweating.

“The poison,” she said. Fale laid her hands on his shoulders and the symptoms of the poison intensified.

“Wow, that really burns.”

“I’m so sorry. How are you guys?” she asked Lisle and Izzy.

“Okay for now. Just a few pins and needles in my feet,” Lisle said, looking at Izzy, who was nodding. “Maybe we should try the other direction on that wall.”

Keron found a few good rocks for his hands on the right side of the wall and pushed left. His muscles strained and shook, and the door inched open. He put his hands through the crack and pulled with all his might. It opened several inches.

“Keep going,” Fale said weakly.

Keron looked back at her and could see her face starting to shine in the torch light. He pulled harder until it was open far enough for a person to get through. Izzy and Lisle squeezed past the stone wall. Fale tried to disintegrate it, but nothing happened.

“Why is my magic not working? The Sage said I could use my magic here.”

“Maybe because he knew it wouldn’t work,” Lisle offered. “Maybe the point is that you are capable without your magic. You must be able to rule without it sometimes. Use your mind.”

“C’mon Fale. Don’t waste your energy.” Keron held out his hand and she took it. “We’re

almost there, Sprout. It can't be too much farther."

"I'm good." Fale smiled, but her eyelids were heavy.

The group rushed down the next few corridors until Fale tripped.

"Get on my back." Keron knelt in front of Fale and she leaned over him, barely hanging on.

When they came upon a tunnel of mirrors, Izzy groaned. Fale didn't know if it was the poison, or Izzy's disposition. Probably a little of both. As they entered, they each made sounds of disbelief.

"What do you see?" Fale asked.

"All I see is a man who looks like me, except older and with a beard. He's standing in the commons at the mages' estate in the mountains." Keron gasped. "He's talking to... he's talking to... my mother. What is my mother doing at the estate?" Keron dropped to his knees and Fale rolled off him.

"Maybe it's your father?" Fale whispered.

"I see—" Lisle began.

"It's my parents," Izzy said. "They are crying. Do they know I'm gone? Do they know I sided with the mages? What have I done?"

"Hmmm," Lisle scratched his head and rested his palm on the back of his neck. "Keron sees the past, Izzy sees the present, I'm pretty sure I see the future, because it's Gasten gathering an army of wizards. What do you see Fale?"

"I see Queen Effailya on a throne, I guess. But her face keeps changing to mine." Fale squinted at the pictures in the glass.

Keron sighed and slumped over.

"Keron!" Fale knelt to his side. "Are you okay?"

"I think you... are going to... have... to go on... without me." He laid his head on his arm and closed his eyes.

"No!" She shook him. "Lisle, help."

"I can't," Lisle said in a tiny voice. "We need to hurry, Fale. Keron has less flesh than I do, and he may have eaten more of the poison, but I feel weak, too."

"We can't leave him. I won't," Fale said.

"You have to," both Lisle and Izzy said.

Fale looked up at them and knew it was a matter of time before they were all paralyzed.

"If we don't get out, we can't get him the antidote. And that crazy Sage may leave us in here to die and rot," Lisle said.

"Thanks for that, Lisle." Izzy stared at him. "C'mon Fale. I don't have time for this."

"Okay, let's go," Fale said reluctantly.

They hurried past the last two red stones. Up ahead was another spiked wall. “Not another dead end,” Lisle lamented.

“No, look.” Izzy pointed down the length of the wall to their right. There was a set of wooden doors with a panel next to them.

They ran to the panel and Izzy slid down the wall. Lisle grabbed her hands as she slowly lowered to the ground.

“Read, Lisle, quick,” Fale said.

“Should people be given the right to choose?” Lisle said.

“Is that it? One question, two boxes?” Fale asked as she, too, needed to use the wall for support.

“Yep. Which one, Fale?” Lisle knelt by Fale and took her hand. “Fale? Should the people be given the right to choose?”

“Always,” she whispered, close to passing out.

Lisle pressed the box and the panel revealed a magical keyhole.

“Whoa, where’d that come from?” Izzy asked.

“Who knows? But there’s only one key I know of around here,” Lisle said.

“The key of F.” Fale held up the key from its cord around her neck. She pulled it over her head and passed it to Lisle.

The key fit and the mechanism in the door started to click and whirl. Finally, the door opened, and Izzy jumped up and pushed past Lisle to get out of the labyrinth.

“Where’s she going?” Lisle laughed.

“I don’t know,” Fale said. “But I don’t trust her. Go follow her and don’t let her get back to the ship.”

Lisle darted out of the door and took the vial held out in the Sage’s hand. He drank as he jogged after Izzy. Fale stumbled to the awaiting Sage.

“Give me the antidote,” she said gruffly.

Fale recovered and Lisle brought a steaming mad Izzy back, but Keron took an extra hour to heal before the Sage announced the next trial was ready to begin. They found the path of woodchips and walked with the villagers. Fale walked at the front with her friends, next to several seriously muscled individuals in ceremonial dress. They had different colors of cloth wrapped around their waist, the women’s cloth tied at one shoulder, and bare feet with thick braided ankle bracelets. Their arms held bands, too, as well as their wrists, all decorated with shells and bells. Dainty lines of black ink enhanced the women’s faces and hands while bold arcs and tribal marking adorned the men.

They soon came to another community area lit all around with flaming torches that stood in the ground and reached Keron’s height. This gathering area was tiered like an amphitheater and had two circles inside. The inner ring was about eight feet in diameter, enough room for two

people to move about, and the outer ring appeared to hold a moat. Fale could hear the jingling of the warriors' bells and the conversations of the people. There was a bridge from the outer edge to the middle circle. Fale stepped close to the edge of the moat on her way to the bridge and she could see down into it. It was a deep pit, not full of water, but several feet of water and hundreds of sea snakes sliding over one another.

"Oh, hell no." She backed up. "Keron."

He moved to stand next to her, "Oh crap, Fale. Do you want to change your mind?"

"Yes, but I can't," she said. "I hate those things. I more than hate those things- they petrify me."

"You'll be okay. We're here for you, right guys?" Keron said. Lisle gave two thumbs up. Izzy just grinned.

The Sage stepped forward and handed Fale a staff. "This is your only weapon. No powers. Can you use a bo staff?" Udalrazak asked.

"Some," Fale admitted.

"Good. The winner is the last one standing in the circle. Or the last one bit." The sage smiled his same creepy grin. "Cross into the pit."

Fale thought the name was appropriate. She held her staff up next to her. It was about six inches shorter than she was and weighted on the ends. She paced herself toward the bridge, walking along the front row of people. Izzy's foot jutted out from in front of her in a swinging motion and caught Fale by the toe. Fale's ankle turned under her, giving a pop, and she sprawled onto the sandy rock.

"Fale," Keron rushed to her. The people laughed, already enjoying the show. Fale glared at Izzy.

"I'm so sorry," Izzy said. "You should look where you're going."

Keron helped Fale up and she leaned on her staff. Her ankle throbbed, but she limped to the bridge with Keron's help. The Sage put his hand up.

"She has to do this by herself."

"You saw what happened. She's injured," Keron argued.

"She will be disqualified," Udalrazak said.

"I can do it, Keron." Fale stepped away from him and limped to the center of the circle. Then the council of mages pulled the bridge out.

Fale stood in normal stance with her feet shoulder width apart, knees slightly bent, back straight and staff perpendicular to her body; one hand up, one hand facing down. The man they had sent in with her was twice her size, more than enough to prove a worthy queen.

He had tribal markings from the side of his face down his neck, across his shoulder and arm, and down half of his tan body. He would have been handsome if Fale hadn't been so focused on his bo staff. He stomped his foot and it jingled. When Fale looked down, she nearly missed the swing he sent at her head. She blocked it with all her body strength. She heard her name being shouted and knew that he was counter- striking.

She aimed a thrust at his neck, but had her staff almost knocked out of her hands. She knew not to step back or spin around, so she tried to advance, but he pushed her with his stabs. She blocked each one, but his hits made her staff bounce and shake. Her hands were sweaty. He swept her feet and she jumped, circling him, stumbling a little on her ankle. She rotated her staff, attempting to land a hit, but when she connected with his thigh, he cracked her in the head.

Fale took several steps to the side, disoriented, and fought his strikes from the outside high and low. Low and high. She spun her staff. Barely catching a few and feeling the full weight of his swing on her thigh. She bent to the side, lowering her staff. He knocked her in the head again and this time she stumbled back, seeing spots.

Quickly, she swept at his feet, knocking him over. As he went down, he jabbed her in the stomach and knocked her back in an unbalanced fall. She was still swinging when she went over the edge. Fale screamed at the top of her lungs, utterly terrified, and was instantly inside a memory of a life that wasn't hers.

She was Effailya and she spoke a language she'd never heard before. It was like suddenly Fale remembered a language she had forgotten. She didn't know who she was speaking to in the memory, but when she opened her eyes and continued to utter the musical intonation, she noticed the serpents had given her a wide berth. They swam away from her. Were they afraid of her?

The council lowered a ladder down to her.

"Congratulations," Udalrazak smiled genuinely at her.

"But I lost," Fale crawled up the ladder.

"You passed, young queen, by speaking the Tarra Song. The reptiles all respond to it," he said.

"Is that what I spoke?" she asked. "The Tarra Song?"

"Yes."

"It was from Queen Effailya's memory," she said.

"Yes."

"How did you know?" she asked.

"The Sage who had the stone carved had more than the first vision; he had written how to test the candidates. He predicted the new queen would be humble in her powers and would speak the Tarra Song if she lost in combat. And so, you did," he said.

Fale was too stunned by the audacity of the Sage and his crazy logic in believing a centuries old prediction to be too mad. She had passed the test. She had seen things in Effailya's memory that didn't make sense and she really wanted to be alone.

"Is there a place where I can walk?"

"That way leads to the beach and that direction is the village." Udalrazak pointed the way for Fale.

"Thank you," she walked the wooded path.

"Fale," Keron jogged to catch up. "Where are you going?"

“For a walk.”

“And you think going alone is a great idea?”

“I can’t think anymore. I’m done,” she said.

“I’ll do it for you. No, it’s not,” he chuckled. “What’s the matter?”

“My head hurts.”

“Oh, sorry. I believe it. Let me see your head.”

“It’s not that. Do you really think I can do this? All this magic and now predictions? I always thought it was so hokey and I’m at the middle of it, I don’t believe in the magic I can do. And if Effailya was so powerful, how did Gryndoll keep her in Garrith to begin with?” Fale asked.

“Oh, I’ve thought about that one. The people, Fale. He trapped her people inside Garrith and the machine outside. She stayed to be with her family and her people. Then, when her life was over, she came back to get her descendants out,” he said.

“Why take so long?” she asked. “Why not come back right away?”

“Maybe that will come back in a memory of Effailya’s. I don’t know,” Keron said. “I’m sure she had her reasons.”

“I don’t know if I should think of Effailya as ‘her’ or as ‘me,’” she said.

“She was Effailya, you are Fale,” he assured.

“Thanks.”

“And you can do this. You don’t have to believe it all to make good decisions, and that’s what you need to focus on right now,” he said.

“You’re right.”

“Do you think we could get started up the mountain tomorrow?” he asked.

“If we get our supplies.”

“I’m going to talk to Udalrazak tonight,” he held her hand in the moonlight.

“Then we’d better get back before they go to bed.”

“Good morning,” Fale felt light stubbly kisses up the side of her face.

“Stop that. It tickles,” she said.

“Really?”

Keron proceeded to brush his two- day stubble over her neck, making Fale laugh in response. “Stop. You’re going to make me wet the bed,” she pleaded.

“I love your laugh,” he said.

“I love everything about you,” Fale said. “Oh boy, it’s a good thing Lisle isn’t here, he’d be throwing up.”

“If Lisle was here, he definitely be a third wheel,” Keron winked at her.

“You came to bed late last night. What did Udalrazak say?” she asked.

“They will get us food this morning and pack up the two donkeys. It should take us three days to get there on foot,” he said.

“We’re walking?”

“Yep, and pulling donkeys,” he grinned at her. “Izzy’s gonna love it.”

“Oh my stars. We have to listen to Izzy complain up the mountain? Three days is a long time,” she said. He laughed.

“Get up and let Lisle and Izzy know the plan and I’ll see if I can help get the donkeys ready to go.”

“See if the Sage will trade one bottle of alcohol for a pair of hiking boots or tennis shoes for me,” Fale said. “Please.”

“No problem,” he kissed her shoulder.

“We’re walking?” Izzy said from across the bedroom.

“You can do it, Izzy,” Lisle said at the door. “Thanks, Fale, we’ll be down in a few.”

“You’re a saint, Lisle,” Fale whispered.

“That’s what they tell me,” he grinned.

“I couldn’t room with her.”

“I wouldn’t expect you to.”

“And you say I’m too nice,” Fale teased.

“You are. Save me a seat at breakfast,” Lisle closed the door.

Fale went downstairs where Josselsyn was preparing a huge breakfast of eggs, ham, potatoes and biscuits with fruit and coconut milk.

“This smells delicious. I hope you’re having company, because this is so much work for just us,” Fale said.

“I enjoy it, and we don’t get visitors very often,” Josselsyn replied.

“Do you have children?” Fale asked.

“They are grown. My daughter lives in the village, but my sons moved to the other side of the mountain,” she said sadly.

“Do they come home to visit?”

“On their father’s birthday we have a family celebration,” Josselsyn said.

“Maybe when I’m queen I’ll make a holiday for going home to your family,” Fale thought out loud.

“That would be a lovely idea, my dear.” Josselsyn smiled warmly at her while pushing

more eggs onto the plate.

Keron walked back to the Sage's house holding a pair of medium-sized running shoes. They weren't Algean, definitely homemade, but the best he could do. Fale would like them better than her boots or her sandals. They were made for walking around these mountains. When he entered the house, he was assaulted by the scents of breakfast and his stomach rumbled.

Fale sat in the kitchen with Lisle and Izzy, eating a forkful of food from her heaping plate.

"Hi." She took a bite and smiled with her mouth closed.

"Looks good," he said.

"Tastes even better," Lisle said, beaming at Josselsyn, who rumbled his hair on the way to the kitchen.

"It's better than the boat," Izzy agreed. Fale and Lisle turned to look at Izzy, shocked that she'd given a compliment. "What? It is."

"She's right," said Fale. "Come, have a seat." She pulled out the chair next to her.

"We have everything we need. Here are your new shoes and you still have four bottles left over," he said.

"Good, we'll pack our duffel bags and leave after breakfast," Fale said.

The sun was an inch above the horizon to Keron's fingers when they set off. There was a farewell party and Udalrazak said if they needed to leave the mules, to tie them at the cavern.

"Why would we leave the donkeys?" Fale asked.

"If you don't need them," was his vague answer.

"Of course, we will need them," she said.

"Then we will wait for your return." He put his arm around his staff and leaned on it.

Fale walked up the path with Izzy while Lisle and Keron led the packed donkeys. Udalrazak had let Fale keep her bo staff and she used it now to hike with, leaning on it with her still tender ankle.

"You know you could have cost me the fight with that little stunt."

"That was the point, genius." Izzy rolled her eyes.

Fale decided not to make conversation because she had nothing nice to say. On foot, they took many more breaks than they had by hoof.

"Those...poor...horses," Izzy panted.

"We're also going uphill," Lisle said.

"Doesn't...matter," she squeaked.

By the time they stopped for lunch, they couldn't see the village anymore. Their food box had still been half full of staples, now it was close to brimming over with fresh food. "How are

we going to eat all that before it goes bad?" Fale asked.

"We have six days at least 'til we get back and most of this will keep. The trick is to use what won't stay fresh, first," Lisle said. Keron laid out a blanket and they ate leftover pig from the barbeque and grapes. There were new tools in their box, too. Items to slice and crush ginger, open coconut, and pound taro root.

Luckily, most of the way was cut with a path, unlike the jungle where there were fallen trees, vines, leaves and other obstacles. All they had to do was walk and watch out for feral dogs. No pumas on Everlign, but the flora was extraordinary and unlike anything they had ever seen. Blooms three times their normal size and colors brighter than anything in nature covered the hillside. Butterflies flitted on the rising and sharply falling breeze, flapping their wings frantically.

At three in the afternoon, the sun passed to the other side of the mountain, giving them some much appreciated shade. Fale had put on her floppy hat with a tank top and her brown shorts and new shoes. Her shoulders were a nice pink, but not painful. She would tan nicely. She secretly wished the men cared about their tan lines and would take off their shirts...

Fale shook her head to focus.

Keron was worried the donkeys would be stubborn, like in books, but the sturdy animals were out-pacing them. They were practically pulling him and Lisle up the mountain. By six they were plunged into darkness, but it had been growing steadily darker for hours, so no one paid much attention.

Suddenly, Fale said, "Look at the moons."

Everyone gazed at the clarity of the shaded white spheres, seeming so large in the sky upon their rising.

"We should make camp," Keron said.

"We're nearly to the top," said Fale.

They had climbed the bulk of the mountain once they got into a groove and stopped needing to rest so often. They were almost to the same height of the mountain behind it. Udalarzak had shown them where to stop climbing and leave the path to circle around the mountain.

"It's a full moon, and we have firewood. Let's go to the top," Lisle suggested.

Keron relented, "Fine."

Izzy complained, "I want to be done."

"We're almost there," Fale yelled back.

They walked another hour until they came to a broken wagon off the path. They had been cutting on and off the winding path as they saw fit.

"This is where the Sage said to stop," Lisle panted. He drank his water.

"Save that," Keron told him. "We don't know what time we get more water tomorrow."

Keron found a small campsite nearby and laid his sticks together at the top, having Fale

light a fire. She felt powerful that night for some reason, standing on the mountain top, facing the moon and the endless ocean. She spread her arms out wide and let fire spray from her palms into the rock ring before her. She'd been there before. As a majestic queen, doing this very thing. She let the magic course through her.

“Fale.” Hands gripped her arms, pulling them down, but she was so close to remembering something important. She couldn't stop. She could see a man beckoning to her, someone she cared deeply for, someone with a claw tattoo on the back of his hand and his face... everything went black.

Chapter 15

Fale woke up in the tent to the sounds of arguing.

“...didn’t hit her that hard.” That was Izzy.

Fale had a splitting headache. Must be a migraine. She tried to drown out their voices, but it was impossible.

Keron yelled, “Not that hard? The behemoth in the village whacked her twice in the head and never knocked her out cold.”

Lisle added, “You held the staff like you were trying to take her head off, not tap her.”

“Well, I’m sorry. It’s done now. Like Fale says, don’t dwell on it. I don’t want to go over this again,” Izzy said haughtily.

“You don’t want to go over it again?” Keron’s voice rose in a way that led Fale to think he was about to lose his temper.

“Hey man, you’re turning purple,” Lisle commented.

Yep, Izzy was dangerously close to being tossed down a mountain.

“Oh man, I got blood on my shirt. She bled on me,” Izzy whined, obviously not paying attention to Keron, or taking him seriously. Fale felt the side of her head, she was laying on a sticky towel. The staff had caught the thin skin over her eyebrow, and it had split open like an overripe banana.

“Keron, what are you doing? Sit down,” Lisle cautioned him.

Fale jumped up and stumbled out of the tent, into a log seat by the fire. Keron grabbed her by the waist before she dove head-first into the campfire.

“I’m okay. Really, I’m okay,” she said. “You worry too much.”

“Your face is still bleeding,” Lisle said. “I think he has a basis for worry.”

“How long has it been?” Fale asked.

“We ate at seven-thirty, after Keron laid you down. We’ve been waiting for two hours to see if you’d wake up,” Lisle said.

“You must have a concussion. I was afraid you wouldn’t wake up,” Keron said, setting her in his lap.

“I did.” She laid her head back on his shoulder. “What happened?”

“You tell us. One minute you’re lighting the fire, the next minute you’re setting the whole mountain into an inferno.” Lisle pointed to the circle of charred grass around them. “Your hands were wide, and your eyes were blank. Keron tried to stop you, but he couldn’t.”

“So, I tapped you on the head with your staff,” Izzy explained.

“You mean you played stick ball with her,” Keron said and Izzy had the impertinence to

laugh.

Keron snarled at her, "You'd better watch yourself, Izzy."

"Or what?" she asked.

"I'll think of something," Keron said.

"Don't think too hard, you'll hurt yourself," she said.

"That's enough, you two," Fale said.

"Keron, you're going to have to do something with her eyebrow," Lisle said.

"No stitches," Fale said.

Keron glared at Lisle, "I told you we should have done it while she was out."

"Fale is an accident looking for a place to happen," Izzy said.

"You did this," Keron replied.

"Hey, I was helping. I didn't ask you guys to drag me along. I'm gonna lose my way of life and my family- and what has she done to show she's a better ruler? Set the mountain on fire?"

"Go to bed, Izzy," Lisle ordered.

"Make me," she folded her arms.

Keron sat Fale on the log and got up, stalking towards Izzy with determination on his face.

"I'm going, I'm going." She got up and darted into her tent.

"Sorry about her." Lisle pointed a thumb over his shoulder.

"It's not your fault, Lisle, it's mine. I'm the one who wanted to bring her with us." Fale touched her temple and rubbed the blood on her fingertips.

"Sprout, I don't think gauze is going to cut it this time," Keron said.

"Can we try it?" Fale asked.

"If it isn't stitched in twelve hours, it can't be done. We need to clean it at the very least," Keron answered.

"I'll hold your hand," Lisle offered.

"Lisle, could you get the med kit? Do you have that alcohol still packed in your bag, Fale?" Keron asked.

"Sure." Lisle went to the packs. The mules were happily munching on grass.

"The bottles are in my small duffel, with my toiletries and pajamas," Fale directed.

Fale sat on a log by herself. "What did you guys eat?" she asked.

"Lisle fixed your bowl," Keron called. She searched the area until she found her bowl on the food box. It contained a soupy rice with chunks of pork. There was an orange next to it.

"Did you use all your water?" she asked.

Lisle came back with the kit. “No, I found a stream over there,” he pointed, “to water the mules.”

Keron returned to the circle with a bottle of vodka and a washcloth. “Why don’t you eat first?”

“Because I don’t want to throw up,” she said. Keron chuckled with Lisle at Fale’s look of disgust. He sat and motioned for her to come closer, so she leaned toward him. Wetting the cloth, he cleaned the area around the laceration first, then held the cloth next to her eye and poured the alcohol directly into the wound. She sucked air in through her closed teeth.

“That stings,” she told him.

“Have a swig of it,” he suggested. She drank from the bottle in a gulp of fire.

“Wow. Potent.”

“We have a lime, would that help?” he asked.

“Probably not.” She took another drink. “Whoo.” She shook her head slowly. It warmed her stomach and made it heavy.

“Take two more shots like that and we’ll doctor your cut,” Keron said. “Lisle, do you still have water on the fire?”

“It’s not boiling.”

“Go put it on the fire.” Keron threaded the curved needle Fale was getting to know well. She had never had as many stitches in her life as she had at that moment. She shuddered and took a long pull at the bottle. This time she welcomed being fuzzy. Something about stitches on her face frightened her more than usual. The liquid slid from the corner of her mouth as she filled her cheeks and swallowed.

Keron handed the needle and fishing line to Lisle. “Put this in the pot.” He wiped Fale’s chin. “How’re you coming?”

“One more,” she said. “Want a sip?”

“Yes,” he looked tired. Taking the bottle, he drained more than Fale had so far and blew out a sigh, wiping his lip with the side of his thumb.

Fale thought he was dead sexy.

She was feeling it. Fale took her last swallow and tried to chug it as Keron had done but got three gulps in and choked. She coughed, her breath stolen by the alcohol fumes. Keron thumped her on the back.

“Not. Helping.” She gasped.

“Lisle, has that boiled yet? Make sure you’ve got the line in there since you went fishing with it,” Keron said.

“It’s been boiling a few minutes,” Lisle called.

“Give it a few more,” Keron put an arm around Fale’s shoulders.

“You are such a nice man,” Fale told him.

“She’s definitely lost it,” Lisle said.

“Very funny, Lisle,” Keron replied.

“No, I mean it. You always give me stitches when I need it,” Fale babbled on, “and you’re handsome, too.”

“Really?” Keron said.

“Oh, don’t fill his head any more, it’s big enough as it is,” Lisle lamented.

“Shut up, Lisle, I want to hear this. Go on…” Keron looked at Fale.

“I remember the first time I saw you. My friends thought you were just fantocci, but all I saw was ‘mine.’ And then you talked to me,” Fale said.

Keron was surprised by the story. “What did you think then?”

“I’d never be good enough for you.” She stared into the fire. “And I haven’t been, have I?”

“Uh oh, this went downhill fast,” Lisle said. “You’d better fix it.” He handed the sterile needle to Keron with a pair of long tweezers.

“Know what I did when I first met you?” Keron asked Fale. She kept staring at the fire, but she shook her head. “I asked people who you were. I didn’t stop asking until I found out your name and age and where you lived.”

“And I thought hanging out with you would somehow make the fact that I was fifteen somehow okay in your eyes. What an idiot I was,” she laughed bitterly.

“It’s not working,” Lisle said.

“I’m here now,” Keron pleaded. “Sweetheart, please, you are more than enough for me.” He placed a finger under her chin and pulled it towards him. Her eyes sparkled with unshed tears.

Keron was about to kiss her when she said, “Do you want the old me or the new me?”

“What?” Keron sat back.

“Lisle knows what I’m talking about, don’t you Lisle?” Fale asked while Keron leveled his gaze on Lisle.

“Yep.” Lisle didn’t even flinch. He was standing up for himself a lot lately. It made Fale proud and produced respect from Keron. “Are you going to use that needle or am I going to have to re-boil it?”

“I’ll do it. Fale, we’ll talk, okay? But right now, I’ve got to stitch you. It’ll be better if I hurry,” Keron said.

“Okay,” she closed her eyes tight.

He chuckled. “I know you don’t like the needle, but what you’re doing opens the cut. I need your eye open.” He directed her, then to Lisle he said, “Come hold her hand like you promised.”

“No problem.” Lisle grabbed Fale’s hand while Keron gave her eight stitches around the outside of her eyebrow and down the side of her left eye.

“We’re really lucky she didn’t break your skull or cause any inner damage,” Keron said.

“How do you know?” Fale asked, finally eating her dinner.

“We can’t know for sure, but swelling on the outside is good, it’s when there’s no swelling outside that there’s probably swelling on the inside. That’s bad,” Lisle said.

“So, this huge lump from my temple to my ear’s a good thing?” Fale asked.

“It could have killed you,” Keron said.

“What’re we gonna do with her?” Fale slurred. “I say we leave ‘er on the island.” She laughed.

“I don’t think her father would be too happy about that,” Lisle said. “I know she’s terrible, but she really does struggle with what Control is doing. I couldn’t just leave her.”

“Fale, you can’t even think like that,” Keron warned.

“I was just kidding, sheesh. You can take your girlfriend back home with us,” Fale joked.

“Not funny,” Keron said.

“Sorry,” she tapped her head. “Not all here right now.”

“I know,” he said.

“I’m going to bed, guys, it’s late. We’ve got a long way to go tomorrow.” Lisle yawned.

“Thanks for your help, man,” Keron said.

“Any time.” Lisle went to his tent and slipped inside.

“Shall we?” Keron stood and held a hand out to Fale.

“Yes.” She took it and followed him into their tent.

“I’m going to wake you every couple hours to make sure you’re okay during the night, so don’t freak out,” Keron warned.

“Sure,” she mumbled through her pajamas, trying not to catch them on her eye. He pulled the neck open for her to slip her head through. They opened his sleeping bag flat and hers, too, laying them with insides together, then zipped them into one double bag. He climbed in and lay his arm under where her head would go, and she slid into place.

“Hmm,” she sighed. “I didn’t realize how tired I was.”

“Me too,” he said, on his side facing her. She reached up to kiss him and he pulled away. “What are you doing, Fale?”

“I’m tired of waiting for the machine.”

“We’re almost there, sweetheart, just hang on,” he told her.

“You’re... not going to kiss me?” she asked.

“Not tonight,” he chuckled, touching her nose, “You’ll thank me tomorrow, when you have your senses back. I made you a promise and I’ll wait until you find that damned machine to have you.”

“Are you sure it’s not because of what I said about the new me?” Fale asked.

“I’m sure, but I’ll ask Lisle about it tomorrow. I am curious.”

“What about a tiny kiss?” she asked.

He leaned over, kissed the corner of her mouth, kissed her other cheek and lightly brushed her lips with his in a touch so gentle, if her eyes hadn’t been open, she wouldn’t have known he’d done it. She smiled.

“That was just teasing,” she said.

“All you get,” he said. “Go to sleep. I’m waking you up in an hour.”

“This is going to be a long night. And no fun,” she pouted. “You could at least wake me in a fun way.”

“We’ll see what I can come up with,” the glint in his eye was unmistakable. She grinned at him.

“Goodnight, then.”

“Sleep well, love.”

Lisle made coffee, salted fish, oranges and biscuits with honey for breakfast. He fed the mules and took down his tent. He let Keron and Fale sleep in as long as he dared before he woke them up.

“Guys...” He was surprised to see them in the same sleeping bag but told himself it was to be expected. “Guys, it’s time to wake up.”

“Huh?” Keron looked up at him and glanced at his watch. “Wow, it’s late.” He roused Fale.

“I’m up,” she said and rolled back over.

“No, Sprout, it’s time to rise and shine,” he said.

“What? I feel like I didn’t sleep at all,” she complained.

“Sorry,” Lisle told them. “I have breakfast made and we’re ready to go when you’ve eaten. I can take down the tent while you have your meal.”

“Is it that late?” Fale asked.

“Eight o’clock,” Keron said.

“We’re two hours behind,” she jumped up and began to strip.

“Excuse us, Lisle,” Keron said.

“Oh. Yeah.” Lisle’s face grew hot and he stepped back from the tent.

“What did you see in there?” Izzy asked. “You are beet red.” She laughed.

“Go stuff it, Izzy,” he said. She laughed harder.

The pack mules were harder to load than the horses and took longer. Everything had to be perfectly balanced and every so often the cinches had to be re-tightened. But they were surer footed than the horses, which was good, because today they would leave the trail and find their own way around the mountain. Heading in the same course as the sun would give them more daylight, too, around the other side of the mountain. The group stopped on the slope for a lazy lunch when they found a suitable stream.

Izzy had gone back to wearing braids and so had Fale that day. Both wore t-shirts, too. Even though the air was thin and crisp, the sun was warm, and they were hot from walking. They ate dried fruit, nuts, and cracked open a few coconuts. They all drank the milk and ate the flesh.

They were unsure how to prepare or eat much of the food sent with them. The labor-intensive meals they were saving for dinner, when there was more time. Still hungry, they ate some dried seaweed baked and preserved with salt.

Fale got out her floppy hat and wished she had saved a pair of the sunglasses she had traded to Udalrazak. She noticed she was getting some color and mentioned so to Keron.

That afternoon, when they were able to view the west side of the mountain range, they could see that in between the first two mountains was a hidden lake. It was level with their elevation, which must have been why Udalrazak had them climb so high before going around the mountain. The shallow valley joined the mountain tops. On the other mountain they would find what they were looking for.

It took the rest of the day to finish their trek around the north and west face of the mountain and walk down the gentle slope to the lake, where they set up camp. Keron watered and unpacked the mules before they started to roll around, then pegged them to the ground to graze. Lisle made the fire, watching Fale closely for her reaction.

“I told you, that’s not going to happen again. I was having a memory. Something of Effailya’s,” she said.

“If she’s been here before, I have every reason to think it could happen again. I don’t know what the triggers are,” Lisle said.

“I doubt it’s going to be the same,” Izzy said.

“See? Even Izzy agrees with me.” Fale pointed to Izzy pulling food out of the box.

“Thanks,” she said in a dry tone.

“You’re welcome,” replied Fale.

Keron handed a tent and tent pegs to Lisle. “Here’s yours,” he said. “Come help me with this one and we’ll do them together.”

“Thanks,” Lisle dropped his tent to the northeast of the fire while Keron’s was to the northwest. The wind was headed south. Fale left to collect water with two cooking pots in her hands and four canteens slung over her shoulders, a bottle of iodine tincture in her pocket.

Izzy boiled cabbage and salted turtle, then made mashed sweet potatoes with dehydrated milk, salt and a little garlic powder. She tried frying some bananas for dessert and everyone ate them, but they weren’t the favorite part of the meal.

Dinner was filling though and satisfying. They played a game of cards on the tarp

afterwards and fell into their routine from the ship of reading and writing. The captain had let them bring the books they were reading, since they were returning to the ship.

Lisle read his mystery, Fale read her suspense novel and Keron read an action/adventure story, Izzy read a romance. At nine o'clock Izzy went to bed and Fale soon followed.

“So, who is the ‘new’ Fale?” Keron asked Lisle.

“I was wondering if you were going to ask me that.”

“Well?” Keron set his book down beside him.

“She doesn’t need to be told what to do all the time. She wants you, but she doesn’t need you. She’s independent- she can take care of herself and sometimes you need to let her. She’s a queen. She makes decisions, she loves with her whole heart and she’s a woman,” Lisle smiled sadly at Keron. “And you can’t judge her for skills you suck at.”

Keron chuckled, “You got me on that one. I’m not good at not being jealous.”

“Neither is she, when she has a reason. She tried to warn you, but you treated her like a little girl, not an equal, whose opinion counts,” Lisle said.

“Why doesn’t she choose you, Lisle? You let her do whatever she wants.”

“I don’t *let* her do anything. She can do what she wants, because she’s a woman now. She makes her own choices,” Lisle laid his book in his lap.

“What if she makes a stupid choice that hurts her?” Keron’s concern was evident.

“Then you pick her up, kiss her and comfort her, and help her move on,” Lisle said.

“Did you kiss her? When she needed comfort and I wasn’t there, did you help her move on?” Keron looked haunted.

“Are you going to punch me if I say yes?” Lisle asked.

“I think that answers my question,” Keron said. “I won’t hurt you this time. Did you kiss her?”

“Yes.”

“What did she do?”

“She cried,” Lisle sighed. “I apologized and she said we wouldn’t talk about it. Don’t be mad at her. It wasn’t her fault.”

Keron blew out a breath. “She’s grown up. I didn’t think she’d love me if she didn’t need me.”

“Well she does,” Lisle said.

“I don’t deserve her.”

“Nobody does,” Lisle threw a stick in the fire. “But for whatever reason, she wants you.”

“Thanks Lisle. I’ve got you covered anytime you need it,” Keron proposed.

“I appreciate the offer,” Lisle said.

“I mean it.” Keron stood up and stuck out his hand. Lisle had never bonded with another male but it felt good, so he shook Keron’s hand. He knew Keron was a man of his word; however, misguided he could be, he followed his conscience.

“I’m going to bed.” Keron disappeared into his tent.

Dawn was dark in the valley. In fact, it would be shaded until probably ten o’clock. It reminded Fale of a rainy day. A few menacing clouds hovered above them. Keron made breakfast and tried to prepare taro the way Josselsyn had told him. He blanched it to remove a skin irritating chemical, then peeled and cubed it, and boiled the cubes for fifteen to twenty minutes. They were tasty and nutty, somewhere between a chestnut and a potato, with the color and texture of a coconut. Josselsyn had told Keron that taro was a starch.

“But it’s decent in calories and has great fiber and several other things we need. I can’t remember. Potassium is one, because I was thinking it might help with muscle cramps from climbing up the mountain,” he told the others.

“My legs have been screaming at me ever since we started,” Izzy complained.

“You should have exercised on the ship. You knew we were coming,” Fale said.

“I thought the boat was a break,” Izzy said.

“There you go thinking again. Gets you in trouble every time, Iz,” Lisle chuckled.

“Shut up, Lisle.” She grinned at him. They were growing a sibling type of relationship. It made Fale a little jealous. She didn’t like telling Lisle to shut up, for fear of hurting him more than she already had. She was always afraid of hurting Lisle. Maybe she needed to stop treating him like a glass doll.

They soon learned that cooked taro must be eaten hot. Once cooled, it takes on a waxy, hard texture that’s difficult to chew.

“Anybody want mine?” asked Fale.

“No,” answered the others.

“Do we have anything else?” she asked.

Keron fried the last of their salted fish and they ate salmon. Full at last, and canteens ready, they broke camp. Loading the mules wasn’t any easier; but in two days, neither one had lost a shoe, or gotten a bruised forelock which couldn’t be said for the horses they’d ridden. Keron was fast becoming a fan of the pack mule. They were strong, smart and cautious. He pulled the cinch tight and leveled the bags again.

“Okay, head out,” he yelled.

“Yippee!” Izzy skipped, bouncing her braids.

“Wait for me.” Lisle handed his reins to Fale with a raised brow.

“Go ahead and frolic.” She laughed with the reins in her hand. Lisle ran up to Izzy from behind, lifted from her waist and swung her around. Her feet flew out in front of her. She hooted

with laughter and Lisle appeared so carefree, Fale was happy just to see it. They skipped hand in hand singing the University academic song with naughty words. Fale held her hand to her mouth and sputtered her laugh. She'd never heard that version. They walked from the west side of the lake to the east side and started out of the valley when Fale pointed.

"Keron, see that tree?" She put his head next to hers and pointed again. "Up the mountain. The tree that looks like a woman."

"I see it," he said.

"That's where we need to go."

"We're this close to the end?" He sounded so excited.

"The beginning of the end," she said.

He looked in her face. "I know," he said.

"Let's go then." Izzy pushed Keron from behind with both hands.

Fale looked around her and there, in the distance, was the buffalo shaped mountain. Next to the lake and down the hill from the tree. She knew she was on the right track. Fale let the mule pull her up the hill. He did most of the work, she just held on. Up and up they climbed, the incline steeper than the mountain they had conquered.

When they had gained halfway, they found a semi-level ledge upon which to have lunch. Keron had to walk south for an eighth of a mile to find water for the mules, so Fale waited for him to eat. He was gone about ten minutes, so she prepared thinly sliced salted turtle with lime juice and biscuits with pineapple circles. They ate the raw turtle with trepidation, but the fatty meat from the offshore reptile was not unlike the veal from Algea.

They ate, drank and rested for close to an hour before ascending the peak once again. The closer Fale got to the hilltop with the "woman" tree, the more excited she became. She walked faster and faster until she was holding the donkey's reins next to her.

"Soon, you'll be pulling that mule," Keron joked.

"I can't help it. I can feel it. I know I'm close," Fale said.

"You can feel it?" Lisle asked.

"I hear something, in my head. It's like a humming, like an echo of a song. Like a whisper of the Tarra Song," she replied.

"The Tarra Song? You mean there's another snake pit up here somewhere?" Izzy's eyes were saucers.

"I didn't say I heard hissing, Izzy," Fale said. "It's like someone's talking, but they're mumbling."

"Hmm. Interesting," Lisle said.

"I wonder who else would be up here," Keron said.

"Who else speaks the Tarra Song? We should have asked Udalrazak before we left. He would know who was meeting us up here," Lisle said.

“That crazy old man probably would have just smiled at you,” Izzy said. “He only says what he wants you to know.”

“True,” Fale replied, pushing on her leg with her hand. “My thighs are burning. Can we stop a minute?”

“I second that,” Izzy quickly responded.

“We’re almost to the rise,” Keron said.

“I know,” Fale said. “Just let me stretch out my quads; I’m cramping.”

“My calves are cramping,” Lisle said.

“That’s called a charley horse,” Keron told him. “I used to get those from boxing on my toes all the time.” Keron showed Lisle how to do a calf stretch. Fale pulled her foot back and held her heel to her behind.

“Aah.” She grimaced at the pain of the stretch but enjoyed the release of her muscles.

“Ow.” Lisle didn’t feel any relaxation, just a tightening extension of his leg from heel to knee.

“Are you prima ballerinas ready yet?” Izzy asked.

“Yeah.” Fale glanced at Keron who resounded with laughter.

The group progressed up the slope to the shapely tree. It had myriad roots, a narrow base, a slight rounding halfway up like hips, with a small waist, and a distinctly female bosom above that. The markings of bark and knots formed a face-like image under twin branches supporting an umbrella of foliage.

“That’s a ‘woman tree’ all right,” Lisle said.

“No drooling, Lisle.” Izzy shook with mirth.

“Oh, you’re so funny,” Lisle said. “I’ve been with real women before.” Keron looked from Lisle to Fale and back to Lisle, raising a questioning brow. Lisle shook his head. Keron let out a relieved breath and Izzy narrowed her eyes.

“What did I miss?” she asked.

“Nothing,” Keron said.

Fale handed her reins to Lisle. She walked north. When she was almost out of sight, Keron called to her, “Where are you going?”

“To find the cave,” she yelled.

“Wait for us,” shouted Lisle. “How do you know where you’re going?”

Fale waited for Izzy, Lisle and Keron to catch up. “I’m going to the place where I had the vision of the tree. It was from the other side. And the singing is louder here.”

“I thought you said it was speaking,” Izzy corrected.

“It didn’t sound like singing to you?” Fale asked.

“You did have a certain melodic tone, I guess, but you were definitely speaking to those

reptiles,” Lisle said.

She looked at Keron and he shrugged. “I was just freaked out. I didn’t pay attention.”

Fale kept traveling north backwards, watching the tree and waiting for the perfect view, while the others followed her.

“Watch where you’re going, Fale. I don’t want to stitch your head again because you trip on a rock,” Keron warned.

“I have to find the right perspective,” she said. They walked next to a wall of rock on the east. She slid her hand along the stones as she stepped.

“Why don’t you just look for the cave?” Lisle suggested. “I assume the giant carving is going to be over here,” he pointed to the rock wall.

“Yes,” Fale said.

“Turn around,” Izzy said.

“Before you fall down the mountain,” Keron added. Fale scowled at him.

When she could see the hill, the tree and the bison mountain in the distance, Fale came across a tall oval of lava rock with a huge upside-down tree in a circle. There was a river flowing half way down the circle, at the tree’s roots and a partial sun with rays shining out to the edges.

Effailya’s symbol, the symbol of the old and the new queens; Fale’s symbol and the marker of the machine. Fale touched the shiny black surface with her fingertips in reverence. Keron stood behind her and wrapped his hand around her waist in support. Izzy walked around them and peered into the deep, dark cavern.

“Hello?” She listened to her voice echo back to her.

“Woo hoo?” Lisle called to hear his echo, too.

“You two are such children,” Keron said.

“They beat you to it, huh?” teased Fale.

“Not necessarily.” He squeezed her. She leaned her head back against his chest.

“We made it,” she said.

“What should we do, Fale? You’re the one who hears someone in there.” Keron asked.

“Let’s make some torches and go get this machine while it’s daylight,” Fale directed. “If it gets dangerous, we can take care of ourselves. Maybe this is why they had the trials. To make sure we can beat whatever is guarding it.”

“We may have to hook the mules to it to drag it out,” Lisle suggested.

“Good idea, man,” Keron said.

Fale was suddenly in another memory. She didn’t even have time to think or she would have tried to stop it. She was dressed in an ivory gown that fell off her shoulders and tucked her tiny waist into layers of diaphanous skirts. Her hair was in an elaborate updo and draped with strings of ivory pearls. She had one hand on a beating heart, something she cared very much about, furry and warm. Her other hand lay on a polished golden heart. As her magic worked and

she grew hot, one heart stopped and the other took its first beat...

Fale opened her eyes in terror. She knew what she had done. She had the power to transfer animation, under certain circumstances. She had stopped one life, to begin another.

“What is it?” asked Keron, holding her up.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” she said.

“But if it’s important...”

“You don’t want to know. I hope I never need to know it again.” She pushed away from him and crossed her arms.

“Let’s get branches from that tree, Lisle,” Keron laid a hand on Lisle’s back.

“I’ve never seen her this way before,” Lisle said when they had walked away.

“She’s really shaken up,” Keron looked back at Fale, biting her fingernail and looking vacantly into the cave.

“What could she have seen?” Lisle asked.

“I have no idea.”

Chapter 16

Rags wrapped around the ends of tree limbs made torches. Izzy had a pair of Lisle's socks tied around her branch. They soaked the torches in kerosene.

"Are we going to camp here tonight?" Izzy asked.

"Probably," Keron said.

"Well, why don't we unload the mules and get them ready to pull the machine, then set up camp?" she said.

"Because I can't wait that long." Fale hopped from one foot to the other.

Izzy pointed at her and asked Keron, "Now who's the child?"

He chuckled. "It's like her birthday, Izzy. Give her a break."

The mule packs lay in a heap and the four explorers stood at the mouth of the cave with torches in hand.

"Someone in there is speaking the Tarra Song," Fale said. "I'm sure of it. I hear the echo. I can't understand the words, though, they're all overlapping."

"Maybe it's another creepy Sage. Oh yay," Izzy replied.

Fale produced a flame in her palm and lit the torches so they could each have their own light.

"Hold them out," she ordered.

Keron led the way into the darkness and the others flanked him, leading the mules.

"The cavern is so big," Fale said. "I wonder if it gets smaller."

"Any number of things could be in here," Lisle said, running his finger lightly along Izzy's neck.

"Lisle," she warned. "I will skin you alive."

"Children," Keron teased, trying to ease everyone's nerves.

Eventually the opening of the cave dimmed, and the torches started sputtering. "Should we go back and make more torches?" Lisle asked.

"I think so," Keron said. "We don't want to get stuck in here. Next time we'll light them one at a time."

"Wait," Fale said. "I see a light ahead. Keep walking. Let the torches go out. It's dim, but I see it."

Carefully, they stepped their way down the wide passage. When his torch went out, Keron tossed it to the side.

"Your flame is going to have to lead all of us out of here, Fale," he said.

“I hope I can see the machine to hook it up to the mules, or maybe find its wheels,” she said.

The other three torches died, and their owners took Keron’s cue and threw them to the cave walls. The light ahead became clearer. In the pitch black, the lights were evidently blue in color; and spherical.

“They’re orbs,” Lisle exclaimed. “Luminescent orbs. You know, like the ancient one I have in my apartment.”

“I see them,” Fale said as they rounded a corner into a chamber filled with blue orbs and a great silver beast.

“Whoa,” they echoed each other.

Keron threw his arms out in a defensive stance, blocking the group from the giant beast. Shoes scattered pebbles on the ground as they skidded to a stop. The silver thing didn’t move though, it stood at attention with eyes closed.

“What is it, Lisle?” Keron asked softly.

“I don’t know. I’ve never seen it before. Any ideas, Fale? Does it trigger any memories? Fale?”

Fale wasn’t listening, she was staring at the horned and crested head, long neck, huge, winged body covered in silver scales, with reptilian attributes, including monstrous teeth and claws. On its back were great spikes, with a side mounted double saddle fit for a queen in ruby red. There were footholds built into the side and Fale walked up to it in a daze.

She climbed up the side of the great animal to find her symbol on a seal next to the saddle. She was surprised to feel a slow heartbeat and the expansion of a giant breath. The Tarra Song was clear now.

“Oh my stars, it’s dreaming,” Fale said. It wasn’t a guard talking, it was the machine that she heard.

“What?” Izzy called.

“What are you doing up there?” Keron asked. “Get down here.” Seeing Lisle shake his head, he amended, “I mean, please come down, I don’t want you to get hurt.”

Fale gave him a puzzled look and crawled down. “I know what she did.”

“Who?” Izzy asked.

“Effailya. The machine is alive and under a sleeping spell,” Fale said.

“It’s bio mechanical,” Lisle guessed.

“That’s right, and it’s dreaming in Tarra Song. That must be how Effailya spoke to it,” Fale said excitedly.

“I don’t hear anything,” Izzy said.

“Am I only hearing it in my head?” Fale asked. Lisle nodded.

“How do we wake it up?” Keron asked. “We’ll never get it out of here with these mules.”

“Oh man, that’s right, ol’ Effailya probably just had it fly in here and hide itself. How are we supposed to work it?” Izzy asked.

“Duh,” said Fale. “We have the key to the machine.” She pulled it out of her shirt.

“Three guesses as to where it goes,” Lisle said. Everyone looked at the machine in its glory and the tiny key around Fale’s neck. No one had a clue.

“Okay. Even if we got it started, what else do we do? What’s our plan? Fale’s obviously got to talk to the thing and hope it’s friendly. Then what? Fly it to the ship?” Keron asked. “I think we should go back to camp and figure out what to do with the machine, then come back tomorrow and try to wake it up.”

“I need to contact Taran, too,” Fale said.

“I concur.” Lisle nodded his head.

“Whatever that means,” said Izzy.

“It means I agree, dummy,” Lisle told her.

“Well, so do I,” she said.

“Then let’s go,” Fale set her palm alight.

“Can I take an orb?” Lisle asked Fale.

“Sure. I’m betting one won’t make a difference.”

It was harder to see in the passageway with only Fale’s small source of illumination rather than the four torches but using the orb they all made it out of the cave without any major spills. However, it was a slow half hour.

They talked about different ways to bring consciousness back to the machine. Could Fale heal it? Could she scream it awake? Would it have powers of its own? What if it woke up and wasn’t friendly? There were so many new questions and no answers. They would have to plan and discover the rest.

There was almost a buzz about setting up camp. For Fale, the music of the dreaming machine played in the background of her every thought. It was hauntingly lovely and comforting. She could feel that at one time she had cared a great deal for this machine, and she didn’t know why.

She flashed back to the man with the claw tattoo on his hand. She had cared for him, too. Who was he? A secret lover of the queen? As far as Fale knew, Effailya had never married.

“Fale?” Lisle brought his canteen to the stream. “You forgot my canteen.”

“Oh, sorry Lisle,” she said.

“Did I interrupt something important?”

“No, just thinking.”

“Are you nervous now that we’ve found the machine?” he asked.

“No,” she said. “I have more questions. What am I doing? What makes me think I can be queen? Who was I? Things like that.”

“I think I understand.” He handed her the empty container.

“Where are you keeping your orb?” she asked.

“In my tent.” He grinned. “Izzy’s thrilled.”

Fale laughed lightly. “You love to vex her.”

“Who doesn’t?”

She filled his canteen with spring water and dropped iodine tincture in it, capped it tightly and shook it. “Here you go.”

“Are you coming back soon?” he asked.

“I’m done.”

“Let me carry one of those pots for you then,” he offered.

“Sure,” she handed him the smaller one by the iron handle and strapped on the other three canteens. “Thanks for bringing that all the way over here for me.” She pointed to his canteen.

“Of course.”

They walked back to camp and set the pots on the fire for dinner. Izzy was cooking. She made some type of salt-preserved bird, possibly a duck, with mashed yams and ferns, but the ferns were too bitter, so they opened a coconut instead.

“So, what’s the plan, brave leader?” Izzy asked Keron.

“I think we should wake up the machine and have Fale tell it to fly down to the ship and wait for us,” he said.

“For three days?” Izzy asked. “I say we have the machine fly us down to the ship with our supplies. There are two seats on it, so you could go down with one pack, then Fale and me, and Lisle with the last pack. Three trips, one hour, boom and we’re done.”

“Not bad, Izzy,” Lisle said.

“The Sage said we could tie the donkeys here. He must have known this was a possibility,” Fale said.

“The order could use some tweaking, but if you’re all in agreement, I guess we can fly down,” Keron said. They nodded.

“What’s the matter, Fale?” Lisle asked.

“Gasten’s going to see that thing coming from a mile away. How is *that* going to open the dimension?” she asked.

“Hey,” Keron said. “No worries, right? We found the machine.”

“It’s magic, remember?” Lisle said.

“You’re both right,” Fale replied. “Oh, I almost forgot Taran, he’ll want to know we found it.”

“If you need to,” Keron said. Lisle laughed at him.

“You can’t be jealous of this one, she just switches places with him,” then Lisle frowned.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“You’re as bad as I am, it’s all over your face,” Keron laughed deeply.

“I’m right here,” Fale said. “I can hear you both. How am I supposed to relax? Idiots.” She crossed her arms.

Izzy rolled her eyes. “Hurry up, I want to talk to Taran.”

“Okay,” Fale sat back on the tarp and leaned on her elbows, closing her eyes. She hardly had to focus on the relaxation anymore, her body knew what to do. Her mind knew the exact moment to let go and let the magic work. She felt the dimensions bend and she was in Taran’s hut in the dark. Fale lay on a straw pallet, itchy and hard, and she looked over to the small figure next to her.

“Minova,” she whispered. “Psst. Minova. Wake up.”

“Taran, have you gone stupid? It’s the middle of the night. Go to sleep.” Minova rolled over.

“Minova—” Fale started.

“Shhh.”

“It’s—” Fale tried again.

“Shhh.”

“We found the machine.” She pushed the words out.

“Fale?”

“It’s me,” she replied.

“You found it?”

“We don’t know how to turn it on yet, and we still have to get it home, but we have it,” Fale said.

“Why don’t you just open the dimension from where you are?”

“I don’t know how. Maybe the machine knows or maybe the mages at home can help me figure it out when they see it,” she said.

“What does it look like?”

“It’s a huge beast, some manner of animal I’ve never seen before. A reptile with clawed feet and wings, but it sings to me. I don’t know if it’s good or bad,” Fale worried.

“Effailya made it, so it must be good.”

“But she made it with the Source Wizard, Gryndoll,” Fale reminded her.

“Maybe she didn’t know he was bad until after that,” Minova suggested. “Taran said *you’re* friends with a wizard.”

“Best friends, but that’s different.”

“How?” Minova asked.

“Lisle would never do anything bad,” Fale said.

“How can you be sure? What if he loved you like Gryndoll loved Effailya? People do bad things to get what they want,” Minova said.

“Are you sure you’re thirteen? You are much smarter than your age,” Fale said. “Is there any news on my, ah, father?”

“He’s good,” she laughed.

“What?” Fale asked.

“Everyone thinks he’s sweet on the widow he lives with, Mother Dandria,” Minova giggled.

“You don’t say,” Fale said. “Huh.”

“What?” Minova asked.

“I’ve never thought of Nelson in love. He never dated. He always put me ahead of his own personal happiness. I used to think it would be nice to have a mother, but I was glad I didn’t have to share him. I never imagined what he gave up for me. I can’t conceive the idea of giving up Keron, for anyone. I’ve been so ungrateful for so many things.” Fale realized.

“Seeing it now will make you a kinder and fairer queen,” Minova said.

“Do you really think I can be a queen at eighteen years old?” Fale asked.

“A good one,” Minova said. “And you’ll have the queen’s wisdom. It’s inside you.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Minova nodded.

“I have one question,” Fale said. “If you were queen, what would you do with the machines and the metal people in the dungeon after the rescue?”

“That’s a good question. It’s not their fault they’re made that way. I’ll have to think about this and get back to you. Okay?” Minova asked.

“Okay,” Fale agreed. “I’m headed back, Taran will probably want to talk to you. Don’t stay up too late. I’ll try to keep you posted, but watch the skies,” Fale smiled.

“Bye Fale,” Minova said.

“Bye Minova.”

Fale sprang back to her group in her own dimension. “Hey all. How’s Taran? Was he excited?”

“Wow. He was expressive,” Lisle laughed.

“Really?” Fale smiled.

“Yeah, he was saying, ‘me an’ the mates’ll be celebratin’ tomorrah night. Tell that Fale she done good by me.’ He was so thankful,” Keron said. “It’s kind of humbling.”

“It kind of sucks being free while they’re slaves,” agreed Izzy.

“What did you learn?” Lisle asked.

“Nelson’s dating someone. Well, he’s in ‘like’ with someone, anyway,” Fale said.

“No kidding?” Izzy asked.

“Yeah, I know,” Fale smiled to herself. “We’d better get some rest. We have a big day tomorrow.”

“The moons have risen in the sky, the sun does rest and so must I,” Lisle sang to the full moons. Izzy howled at them like a feral dog, to which they heard a faraway answering call. Izzy nearly fell over laughing with Lisle.

“Children,” Keron said, shaking his head. “Will you walk with me, Fale? Please?”

“Sure.” She stood up and dusted off her seat.

Lisle and Izzy chased each other into their tent and one yelled, “Pillow fight,” before their tent began to quake. Keron slipped his long fingers around Fale’s and laced them together, pulling her away from camp. They walked south, all the way back to the “woman” tree.

“Where are we going?” Fale asked.

“I wanted this view,” he said. “You can see the camp from here. You can also see the valley and the lake and mountains.”

“It’s beautiful in the moonlight,” she leaned up against the tree. Keron reached around her, tugged her hair from its braid and plunged his hands in it. She leaned her head back and he skimmed through it with a soft touch. Starting at her skull he ran his fingers through the length of her soft strands and laid the gentle waves on her shoulders. He put his hands around her waist and held her close to him. She studied him in the silver moonlight. His black hair so dark and eyes so blue, she cherished every angle in his face, and she touched his strong jaw, running her fingers along the place where the muscles jumped when he was angry.

“I love you,” he said, surprising her. Putting his right hand behind her head, and his left hand on her back, he kissed her mouth. Tenderly at first, then hungrily. Her chest rose and fell as she fought to control her breath.

She watched him. “But I said-”

“I know what you said. You said to never kiss you again unless it was forever.” He kissed her petal soft lips again and again. Her eyes filled with tears.

“Keron, I don’t know if I can-”

“I know I’ve hurt you, Sprout. But I see you- the real you- the new you. That’s who I love. I want to let you make mistakes and pick you up. I want to learn how to be a partner with you. Please, please let me spend the rest of my life making it up to you.” He got down on his valezsan alloy knee and pressed her hand to his heart. “Fale Valine Argohdian, will you do me the honor of being my true wife?”

Fale covered her mouth with both hands and inhaled sharply, her eyes wide and brimming with tears. "I want to say yes, you have to believe me."

"But?"

"But I haven't succeeded at this yet. We've found the machine, but I'm at the beginning of something big. Can't you feel it?" She took his hand.

"I thought this was what you wanted." He stood and took her face in his hands, dipping his head, he pulled her mouth to his and met her lips with his own, hungry for her taste, love and acceptance.

"It is everything I want from you- but there is more for us. I won't be a good queen by myself, I need you. Will you be my king? Will you rule with me?" Tears trekked down the hollows of her cheeks.

"Fale. I can't. I don't know how. I'm honored to be your Wardsman, but what you're asking is beyond my dreams. I wasn't meant to be that...that..."

"Important? Worthy? Because you are. Do you think I know what I'm doing? All you can do is be loyal to the people you serve. Everything good will flow from that."

"I can try. I can learn- with you." He stood facing her and sighed.

"What?" she asked softly.

"You are everything to me." He wiped her tears and kissed her senseless. "I can accomplish anything with you by my side."

"When this is over, we will start a journey of our own," she said.

"When it's *all* over?" His voice rose an octave.

"What? Is that bad?" Her hand reached out to trace the line of his collarbone.

"No. It's just..." He sighed. "It's just that I don't know what tomorrow brings. I want to be with you forever."

"You are with me, silly." Fale smiled up at him in the moonlight.

Keron raked a hand through his hair. "Yeah. Sure, Fale."

Fale thought she detected his cynicism, but she was too happy. They were here, the machine was nearby, and this crazy journey to find herself was heading to its end. She clung to the hope that everything would turn out right. Keron would understand when it was all over. Unless, something unexpected were to happen.

Chapter 17

After a hearty breakfast and coffee at camp, the eager foursome traversed the interminably long passageway to the vast underground chamber lit with ancient orbs. Lisle brought along his orb for vision's sake, on the promise that it would return to camp with him at the end of the day. He'd already named it Davo' and spoke to it jovially during their long walk. Fale smiled at him fondly in the flickering light of her magic flame and Lisle winked at her.

Upon reaching the cavern, the monster appeared every bit as imposing as it had the day before. Fale wondered why Effailya built the machine in that shape. The orbs gave it an eerie blue glow and its expanding body served as a reminder it was indeed alive.

"So how do we turn it on?" Izzy asked.

"You're so patient, Izzy," Keron said.

"You wish," was her snarky comeback.

"Chill out, Iz," Lisle warned. "Everybody, look for a keyhole."

Izzy laughed.

"An appropriate keyhole," Keron suggested.

Fale sang to the enormous reptile in Tarra Song to wake it up. She asked where its keyhole was, but it was dreaming of flying and eating ocean fish. At least that's what she gathered from the snippets she heard in her mind. There was a lot of territory to cover and the animal stood on four feet with its neck in the air like a twenty-foot-tall statue.

"How can I check its head?" Lisle asked.

"I'm not sure we can," Keron lamented.

"I can climb up its neck," Fale offered.

"Absolutely not," Keron said without thinking. Lisle slapped the heel of his hand to his forehead as Fale developed a look of determination.

"I did it again, didn't I?" Keron whispered to Lisle.

"Yup."

Climbing the animal's leg and stepping in the foot holds on its side, Fale ascended to the ruby gemstone saddles. They were cool and smooth, with a vivid glow, having deep seats and comfortable leg indentations. She shimmied carefully up the spiny neck and felt every inch of the head, minding the sharp canine teeth protruding from its metal lips. Fale's key didn't appear to fit into any of the visible orifices.

"I don't know what else to check," she called down. The others looked up from the various body parts they were searching. "It doesn't work on anything up here."

"Please come down now?" Keron asked. Fale had to work on keeping her balance from her shock. Had he just asked her nicely to come down on his own? Maybe he truly did want to change. How exciting. She began her slow descent. Halfway down, she sat in the saddle and ran

her thumb along the seal she had seen yesterday, cleaning out the caked dust from the edges with her fingernail.

“What are you doing?” Lisle asked.

“There’s a seal here with my symbol on it,” she said.

“Can you twist it?”

“No, it’s flat,” she replied.

“Then push it,” he said. When she pushed, it made a crack sound and lowered about a millimeter.

“I think I broke it,” she said.

“It’s old. Maybe it’s stuck,” Keron’s voice echoed through the cavern. Fale pressed again and leaned on the button. It sunk down into the hole and when she pulled her finger out, the seal slid to the side, revealing a keyhole.

“I found it,” Fale called. She took the cord off her neck and held the key of F in her hand. “Are you ready?” she asked her teammates.

“Yeah,” Keron backed up. Izzy’s brow was wrinkled, and she stood behind Lisle’s shoulder.

Fale inserted the small key and gave it a half turn. The machine did not seem to turn on, in fact it shuddered and stilled. A panel in the beast’s chest popped open and a piece of parchment floated to the ground.

“What’s that?” Izzy pointed to the cracked, yellowed rectangle on the cave floor. Lisle and Keron moved to the open panel.

“What is it?” Fale asked from her perch upon the animal’s back.

“You’d better come down here,” Lisle said. Fale grabbed the key and descended as quickly as she could. When she reached the bottom, she found Izzy looking over Lisle’s shoulder again as he read from an aged paper.

“What does it say?” Fale asked.

Lisle read it aloud, “Thou us’d the key to turneth off Argyntus the Tarragon. To restart, thou must giveth him life. This may only be done by the transefereth of animation from the queen’s heart, ‘fore the tarragon dies, or it cannot be done atall.”

“What does it mean?” Keron asked.

“Is it like a riddle or something?” Izzy questioned.

“It doesn’t even rhyme, Izzy,” Keron said.

“It means we just turned the machine off,” Fale squeaked.

“Worse than that- we turned off a machine that’s biomechanical and we have to jumpstart it. But I’m not sure about the part with transfer of animation.” Lisle turned the page over, but the back was blank.

Fale looked up at the cavity in the tarragon’s chest. When the panel had fallen away, it had

exposed a golden heart, interconnected with wires and tissue. Fale could see Effailya's memory as if it were right in front of her. One hand on a beating heart and one hand on the still golden heart. She knew what it meant and what had to be done, but how could she do it?

"Is the tarragon dead?" Izzy asked.

"No," Fale said. "It's still singing, but softer and slower."

"The parchment says we have to restart the heart before it dies, or it can't be done at all," Lisle said. "What does it mean, the queen's heart?"

"Fale? You're awfully pale. Do you know what transfer animation is? We don't have much time," Keron asked.

"Yes." Fale looked up at the tarragon weighing its worth in her mind.

"Well, what is it?" Izzy demanded. "I didn't come all this way to give up."

"It means I have to transfer something else's animation into the tarragon."

"You mean, give the tarragon someone else's life?" Lisle asked.

"Yes," she said quietly.

"Can you try to heal it?" Keron asked.

"I can try." Fale laid her hands on the tarragon's heart and used her healing power to its fullest extent, but the heart lay dormant. The Tarra Song took shape, though, into weak thoughts: "What's happening? Help me."

"Nothing," Fale said.

"What if we use one of the mules?" Keron asked.

"Sure," said Lisle excitedly. "That would solve the problem."

"No," said Fale with deadly calm. "It has to be from the queen's heart. A sacrifice of something the queen loves."

"But the only things alive that the queen loves here are..." Izzy's eyes were wide with horror. "No. No. You can't."

"I know," Fale said, deflated. Time seemed to stand still as each one in the group gave up on the idea of a solution. Minutes passed by in silence and the tarragon quaked again. Fale knew it was slowly expiring.

Lisle understood, too. "Use me, Fale. This is it- what I'm here for. This is my purpose. I can right the wrongs of the wizards. It needs to be me, and it needs to be now. The entire mission revolves around this moment. The tarragon is dying."

"I can't. I won't," Fale cried.

"Please Fale," Lisle said.

"Do you *want* to die?" she asked.

"I want my life to mean something. I want to fix what I was part of oppressing. I need to mean something," he said.

“Oh Lisle, your life already means so much.” Tears lay on Fale’s lashes.

“No, Fale, I can see it now. I was always meant to be the machine. It’s what’s supposed to happen.” He stood shoulder to shoulder with her and took her hand.

“Lisle—”

“Do you love me?” If this was the end of his life, he wanted to hear it.

“You know I do,” she cried, resisting the urge to look at Keron.

“Please do this for me. It will be all I ever wanted; I know it. And I will still be with you. My heart will fly with you forever this way. Hurry, before it’s too late. Taran, Minova, Nelson and the people in that dungeon need me,” Lisle said.

“I can’t,” Fale shook her head.

The tarragon let out a shuddering breath and wondered to itself, though Fale could hear it, “Why do I feel this way? I’m scared. Help me.”

“Don’t be selfish, Fale. This is not your sacrifice to give, it’s mine, and I’ve made my decision.” He put her hand on his heart. “Do it, Fale.”

“Help me,” the tarragon pleaded silently.

“Fale,” Keron said. Izzy looked on in horror.

“Fulfill my request, Fale.”

“Help me. Help me. Help me. Help me. Help me.” The Tarragon's chanting beat like a tribal drum.

“Do it now,” Lisle shouted.

She hugged him tightly. “I love you.”

“I love you, too,” he said. “I’ll be there in the sunsets.”

“I don’t think I can.” She looked up at him through her tears. “I don’t even know how.”

Lisle took both of her hands, kissed them and placed one on his heart and one on the golden heart of the tarragon. “Think about how you love me and how much you can’t wait to fly with me over the open sea,” he smiled at her. “Use your magic.”

She peered into his eyes and said, “I will love flying with you.”

“Send me to my destiny, Fale.”

She tried not to think about what she was doing. Her hands grew hot. She was uncomfortably warm, then a shockwave of power went through her, like the stabbing tingle of touching a livewire. Ten thousand hornets buzzed in her ears. Her fingertips were on fire.

The tarragon’s heart began to beat. She lowered her arms.

Lisle’s body fell to the ground.

Fale covered her face with her hands while her heart shattered, and Izzy crumpled.

They were all in a state of shock. Fale looked to the tarragon, but it didn’t move. Her eyes

searched the cave. To the side of the tarragon, an enormous set of armor was visible, obviously decorative, made for the animal in the queen's colors.

The colors would need to be repainted; that is, whatever colors Fale chose. Until now, she still hadn't been sure she could be the queen. A sheathed sword sat with the armor, its gilded hilt scrolled and jeweled. Either a tarragon's prize or a queen's weapon, Fale didn't know.

Keron stepped in front of Fale and put his hands on her shoulders. "How can I help?"

"You can't," she said. "You just can't." She bowed her head, letting her hair make a curtain around her face.

"Don't take this all on yourself, Fale. He made his decision. We all loved Lisle," he said. "He just has another shape now. Don't hide from me, please."

"I'm hiding from myself, from the truth," she said quietly.

"I lost you once, I can't do it again," he pleaded.

"You let everyone down, and now you're a murderer- no better than Gasten. You killed Lisle!" Izzy shouted. Fale looked up and pushed Keron out of the way. Izzy stood facing her with a maniacal half smile, that twisted her face into a grimace. She gripped the broadsword Fale had seen with the armor.

"All he ever did was love you and you used your 'powers' to kill him. You couldn't be happy stealing Keron from me, could you?" Izzy wielded the sword with both hands, holding it straight at Fale's chest.

"Izzy—" Keron said sternly.

Fale held up her hand to silence him. "Iz, I know you're hurting. I know how you feel. Lisle..." Fale couldn't finish. A sob racked her body as she looked at Lisle's still form on the cave floor. Izzy's sword dipped as she watched Fale cry. "I loved him, Izzy. I didn't kill him."

"Liar," she yelled. "I watched you." Izzy lunged at her, but Fale spun out of the way, feeling the edge of the sword on her lower back. The blade, being dull from lack of use was still thin and Fale felt the cutting-edge bite through her t-shirt. It would surely be able to stab her if Izzy had the opportunity.

"Izzy think about what you're doing," Fale said.

"I don't have to think about it, Fale," she spat. "You killed Lisle and you are going to pay."

"Fale's death won't solve anything. It won't bring Lisle back," Keron tried to rationalize with Izzy.

"Maybe not, but I wouldn't have to deal with her anymore." Izzy took quick, shallow breaths, tears streaking her cheeks and sparkling in the blue light. "It would solve all my problems." She stood holding the sword straight in front of her with her feet planted wide, waiting for the opportunity to slash again.

Fale's hands were held out in front of her, her palms facing Izzy in a gesture of peace. Izzy charged her, swinging the broad sword upward and toward Fale in a diagonal figure eight. Not wanting to hurt Izzy, Fale shot enough flame from her palms to force Izzy back as she dodged the swing, catching the upward motion of the figure eight on her elbow.

The tip of the sword sliced her skin and it bled, but the cut wasn't long or deep. Izzy circled her blade through in a big arc and aimed for Fale's ankles. Jumping at the last second, Fale was breathing heavily. She disappeared.

"Where are you, coward?" Izzy screeched furiously.

"Izzy, this is ridiculous," Keron began.

"Stay out of this," she shouted. "You stood by and let her do it. You're no better than a murderer."

"You were here, too," Fale said.

Izzy spun and stabbed at the air repeatedly where Fale's voice had been. She screamed in frustration. "Come out here and fight me, you butcher."

"Put down my sword and we'll talk," Fale said. Izzy stepped swiftly toward the sound and feinted a thrust to the neck, swinging low as fast as she could, and connecting with flesh.

"Dammit Izzy," Keron said as Fale made a gravely thumping noise, falling on the pebbled floor. Izzy smiled.

"*Your* sword? You claim it? Just because it's in this cave with the machine, you think it's yours? You are so rapacious." She stalked the three steps to where Fale's knee was outlined in the dirt.

"It belonged to the queen, so it's mine," Fale stated confidently.

"I wondered why you didn't disintegrate it," Izzy said, attempting to distract Fale. "Fine, I'll put it down." Izzy lowered the sword. The tip touched the cave floor and she bent to place the handle on the ground. Fale appeared in front of her, sitting with one knee bent behind her and one before her. As Izzy was almost to the ground, she gave a growl and lifted the hilt with both hands, driving it towards Fale's chest.

"No." Keron dove into Fale's side and the sword missed her chest, piercing her right bicep, coming out the other side. Izzy squatted next to her.

"You stabbed me!" Fale exclaimed.

Keron sat up and punched Izzy in the face with all the power of his valezsan arm. Her head flew back on her shoulders and her mouth opened, her eyes rolling up. Izzy reached for the sword and Keron held his fist up with his elbow out, daring her with his expression. She grasped the hilt, pulling it out of Fale's arm and standing in one smooth movement, like the inner workings of a clock. Before Izzy could point it at Keron, he stood and threw a right hook, taking the sword from her with his left hand.

"It's over Izzy," he said as she recovered from the hit, bloody and bruised.

"I can't follow her anymore, either of you. You can go back on your own- I'll find my own way home." She ran over to Lisle's lifeless body, dropping beside it and whimpering to him, "I'm sorry."

"What about the tarragon?" Keron asked.

"I have no idea. I performed the transfer. I don't know what else to do. We need to bury Lisle's body," Fale said to Keron.

“On the mountain, or in here? This could become Lisle’s cave.”

“I like that idea,” Fale said. “Let’s go get the shovel from camp.”

Fale tossed a load of soil to the side with her shovel. Keron joined her and they dug a deep hole. Izzy sat staring at the blue orbs of the cave.

Fale removed Lisle’s necklace and secured it onto her own neck. Keron came to help her lift his body and they lowered it into the grave. Izzy cried anew when they tossed dirt on Lisle’s chest. Fale had a hard time filling the hole, but she knew this level of strength was going to be required of her to become queen. So, she worked hard to control her grief as they worked.

When the soil was all replaced and a lumpy mound of darkness was all that remained as a grave marker, Fale spoke over Lisle, “Spirit to air, and spark to flame, tears to waves, and to the ground again.”

The tarragon awoke with a great bellow that shook the cave walls and the queen’s heart swelled with life, but it was shattered with grief. What had she done?

End Book 2

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{I'd love to hear from you!}

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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.

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Also by the Author

at
Rogue Phoenix Press

The Final Rescue

Freedom Flight Trilogy *Book Three*

Chapter One

Gasten walked with purpose. He strode through the tunnels with the ease of ownership. He was looking forward to tonight. Keeping the peace in Alloy City just happened to benefit his cause. With his metal army, he would charge through new dimensions and steal their power for his own. Once he had the machine, of course.

“Damn her.” He remembered the visions he’d seen of her. Getting her apartment, stopping the fight for that guy... He wished he could have seen Fale defeat his best men. She was a mystery to him. But as much as she fascinated him, like a beetle-on-a-pin, he hated everything she stood for. And he wouldn’t stop until she was dead.

The caverns of the lowest levels in the industrial plant glowed dimly yellow; the furnaces vomited their heat in shivering plumes to chase the whirling shadows. The heat was repugnant to the Source Wizard as he wore his ceremonial robes for this induction. On tonight’s agenda was a man who had aided Fale’s group and could not escape punishment. He had worked for the Control agency under Gasten’s own influence, and yet helped the mages’ cause by sheltering the group and proving himself a traitor.

“Good evenin’, Sir.” One of his cronies appeared as he found the right cave. He knew by the pleading.

“Please, have mercy. I didn’t mean any harm. Where’s my wife and child?” The man lay on a silver table, his body naked and bound by his wrists and ankles. By the time they were done he would be one of Gasten’s elite army. A soldier with human insides, a human face, but the rest made of a valezsan alloy, the strongest metal on the planet. He would be taller, broader, heavier and a great addition to the guards in Garrith.

“Ah, Teague. You know very well that they await you. Your wife is already recuperating, and you will be sent to Garrith together. I will induct you myself. Don’t feel too bad if you don’t recognize each other, though.”

“What of my daughter?” Teague’s eyes were wide with fear, like a horse in a storm. It gave Gasten a little thrill to be the source of his fright.

“The girl didn’t survive the transfer.”

“You are a cruel, heartless... monster.” Teague spat the words at him but couldn’t stop the

tears from running down his temples to pool in his ears.

Gasten laughed heartily and then wiped his own eye. "Why yes, I am."

He was already beginning to have fun. This transfer would be the highlight of his week. The woman, Teague's wife, had only lasted through the removal of the first few strips of skin before passing out, and she remained silent through the procedure apart from some whimpering. No fun at all.

One of the men rolled in a cart. Gasten checked over the tools. Knives mostly, and metal parts that would be grafted to Teague's muscles; a planer for the skin, and the glass enclosure for his heart that would be visible in the chest of his new mechanical body. Teague looked at the cart and started to cry.

"I can help you. I can contact the mages and tell you where Fale is."

The man with the cart raised his hand to strike Teague, but Gasten held his hand out. His robe was suffocating in the feverish cavern, and he pulled back the hood, running his hand through his long black hair. His thick rings glinted silver.

"Where is she?"

"I- I-don't know right now. The m-mages have her I... I could find out, but I'd have to do it tomorrow. I c-can call someone. Yeah, I know just who to call." Teague's head was raised, and he nodded, encouraging Gasten to trust him.

The Source Wizard Gasten tilted his head in thought. If he knew where she'd gone, he could go after the machine. The power he would have. He would visit every dimension in existence and dominate them. *I alone will steal their power.* His army was growing, and he would need them all. Keeping slaves in so many places would require a master with ultimate power. But surely, she'd already found the machine. It had been months since he'd seen her vision. She'd never leave him a clue, of course; she would burst in with the machine and capture the slaves in Garrith...then she would come for him. He'd know when she appeared. He had men out hunting for her. If they found her, they'd find the machine and bring it back to him. He had to have faith in his men. He almost snorted then.

He'd found his men on a planet of idiots. He was surprised some of them even knew how to procreate. But they were loyal, and they were afraid, and that's all he needed. They did all the manual labor in the wizard compound, and anything else he told them to. They knew the consequences; it wasn't a difficult choice.

"No," he said lightly. "I don't think so. We're here now and you will help me. You will be the next captain of my army... You have betrayed your last human."

"No--" Teague dropped his head back to the table and it made a thunk.

"Please save your strength." Gasten ran his ringed finger over Teague's forehead.

"Why can't I move?" Teague's panicked eyes were wide. He could speak, but he was paralyzed.

Gasten chuckled. “It makes working easier if you can’t move on your own.”

“No. No, please. Please, you can’t—” Teague screamed as they peeled off the first six-inch-wide ribbon of his skin.

Want to read the rest of the story? Click the link here: www.amazon.com/author/JenniferHasin

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