



First Dimension

The Saga of Safe Haven Book One

Rebecca Royce

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Published 2010

ISBN 978-1-59578-650-0

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Manufactured in the United States of America

Liquid Silver Books
<http://LSbooks.com>

Email:
raven@LSbooks.com

Editor
Maria Rogers

Cover Artist
Anne Cain

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Dedication

To my parents, with love, for all imaginable things.

Blurb

The only person who can save not one but two dimensions, Hadley Pettigrew is living a simple, undisturbed life on Earth, completely unaware of who and what she is. That is, until a dark, seriously sexy stranger kidnaps her off her science vessel and forces her to change all of her beliefs about what is and is not possible in the course of twenty-four hours.

When faced with the decision of letting his princess continue to suffer or using her daughter to return to his own dimension, Hawk easily chose to kidnap Hadley. What he didn't anticipate was how much he would admire her intellect or desire her body.

Together Hawk and Hadley will have to overcome past obstacles to carve out a new future, not just for themselves but also for more people than they ever dreamed possible. The first year in a new dimension has arrived. Who will live and who will die is almost as important as who will fall in love.

Prologue

Almost 150 years ago

It had been sixty years since Annabelle died. How the hell was that possible? Hawk took a swig of the liquid they called alcohol that he'd been nursing, and toasted the universe for its perverse sense of humor. Zamara was still lost to them, living in whatever madness possessed her to continue on with this charade, and he was no closer to rescuing her and bringing her home than he had been when he watched her first born child wither away in a matter of hours and die years before her time.

Walking to the other side of his vessel, he felt the sea-swept air blow his hair out of his face as he seriously contemplated jumping overboard. Oh, he knew it wouldn't kill him, but at least it might give him some peace to be by himself on the bottom of the ocean for the next decade or so.

His Warrior instincts stood at attention and he knew Jeremiah stood behind him before he ever turned around. Taking a deep breath, he forced the malaise off of his face and brought himself under control.

"What is it, Jeremiah?" He whirled around to face what he was sure would be an accusation of his becoming a traitor or worse, his second in command would be forced to box him up, a fate worse than death.

"So what is the plan, my Prince?"

"Pardon me?"

Jeremiah laughed, raising his head to the sky. "I'm asking you, Prince Hawk, what the plan is now that we've both abandoned Zamara. I know you didn't just do this to us without first making a plan."

"We didn't do anything. I walked away. You haven't done anything of the kind." Hawk clenched his teeth. His own dishonor was his to bear. He couldn't have the men following in his wake. That would simply be too much to shoulder.

"If you think I am going to sit there year after damned year and watch as he breeds her for his own sick enjoyment you are hugely incorrect, sir. If you hadn't left, I would have."

"We swore a blood oath to do just that—to be by her side, to protect her." Hawk closed his eyes and leaned against the back of the ship's railing. He missed his birds. If he could just fly for a few minutes back home in his own dimension he could find some clarity.

Jeremiah's hand on his shoulder brought him back to reality. The blond-haired Warrior had raised an eyebrow. "Are you drunk?"

Hawk shrugged. "A little bit."

"I don't think I've ever seen you drunk before."

"Men in my family don't get drunk." Was he slurring his words? He wasn't sure. "It's not the Warrior way."

"Nor do the men in my family." Jeremiah put out his hand and took the bottle from Hawk. He took a swig and made a face. "It's disgusting." Hawk noted it didn't stop the other man from downing another large sip.

“You haven’t answered my question about your plan.”

Hawk sighed. “We obviously need help. Ninety years ago we arrived here on Zamara’s lifetime’s trip. We have no business still being here. I think we have to go home and get reinforcements. Some kind of mystical help.”

He closed his eyes again. If he’d only realized what was happening sixty years ago, he could have found a way to get back then. Annabelle might still be alive. A tear spilled down his cheek and he wasn’t embarrassed to let Jeremiah see it. He’d already lost so much credibility, how much worse could it get?

Sweet Annabelle who had never harmed a soul. Each day he had known her had been a joy. He couldn’t save Zamara, but her daughter he could protect. The day he’d fallen in love with her, on her twenty-second birthday, and realized she loved him too, had been the best day of his life.

The woman’s soul was pure like the snow that lined the purple mountaintops in Haven. She never needed answers; she never prodded him with questions. It hadn’t mattered to her at all that he hadn’t aged a day in all the time they’d known each other. She was just happy to be with him.

Her red hair had looked like sunset, an unexpected contrast to the dark brown of her eyes. But now they were gone—had been for sixty years—decomposing to nothing more than dirt and ash.

Every second with her had been ... such a relief.

“If we want to go home, we’re going to need either Zamara or one of her daughters.”

Hawk’s eyes flew open and his thoughts returned to his present dilemma. “I know and therein lies the problem. I can’t get to Zamara and you and I together are not going to be able to get to the newly born princess.”

Jeremiah cleared his throat. “Did you see her before you left?”

“I couldn’t watch Deirdre die and I didn’t stay to see the next one born.”

“I did.”

“We have to go back, Jeremiah. We can’t leave the Princess there to wallow.”

“What we need, Hawk, is the others. There are more Warriors who feel as we do.”

Hawk slammed his hand down on the railing. “I won’t ask anyone else to follow in my traitorous behavior.”

“I don’t think you’re going to have to ask.”

Hawk spun around. In front of his face, one man after another materialized onto the deck of the ship. Hawk did a quick head count. Fifty souls. He hadn’t expected any help, let alone so many. His heart swelled with pride while he worked at looking aloof and in control.

“I told them to give us a few minutes to talk before they arrived.”

“You did this?”

Jeremiah shrugged. “I did.”

For the life of him, Hawk couldn’t understand why Jeremiah would still feel such loyalty to him after such an abysmal failure, but he would take all the help he could get.

Raising his voice to be heard over the wind, he stepped forward. “I can’t ask this of any of you. What we are doing goes against the blood oath we all swore before leaving Haven.”

“We’ve spoken of that.” Jeremiah walked towards the other men and put his hand on the youngest member, Stone’s, shoulder. “It seems to us that not to do something at this

point would be to continue to break our oath.”

“Everyone must not have agreed.” About half of his fighting force was not on deck with them.

“Some people did call us traitors.” Stone’s voice rang out from the crowd. He sounded harsh and his eyes flared with anger. “They’re all traitors. Addicted to what is happening to them and to Pettigrew’s power.”

Hawk shook his head. “Some of them are simply fulfilling their duty.” He wouldn’t, couldn’t condemn them. Not when he was still so unsure about his own decisions.

“You are kinder than I am, Hawk.” Jeremiah’s voice held venom in it and Hawk wondered silently how long his men had been fuming like this and why he had thought he was alone in his worries.

“If you are with me, and I cannot ask you to be, then we need to steal one of the children.” He couldn’t bring himself to call them princesses or ladies anymore. They were abominations. Bred to die and the reason Zamara was locked in her drug induced stupor. He was through fooling around.

A ringing hit Hawk’s ears and he looked abruptly at the sky. Something was coming. The first bolt of lightning hit the ship, sending him backwards and almost overboard. Not wanting to give them a second shot, he jumped up. The humans whom he’d hired to help man his ship didn’t deserve this. They all slept below deck.

It looked like he’d be getting his swim after all.

“Follow me overboard.” He commanded and was glad to hear each of his men jumped into the ocean. They wouldn’t die, couldn’t drown, and hopefully they could draw the fire away.

Pettigrew’s message was clear. He’d just declared war. Hawk didn’t care how long it took, he would get one his daughters and he would use her to get back home. One way or another, no matter how long it took.

Chapter One

Present Day

Hadley squinted to get a better look at the man who had dragged her from her bed early this morning, tied her arms to the back of the mast, and now informed her the whole thing was a mistake. Below deck, she could barely make out the sounds of a television blaring and some distant rock music. People were obviously enjoying themselves. Hadley clearly was not. The truth was, she could barely see without her glasses and the midday sun's heartless glare didn't help. If she wasn't so completely stunned by what had happened, she would have demanded to be taken down below and spared the onslaught of the heat on her pale, red-headed skin.

He cleared his throat and repeated himself as if she was a child, or a very dense adult. "On behalf of my entire crew, Ms. Pettigrew, I owe you an apology. We didn't mean to kidnap you. It was your sister we were looking for."

"You know what?" She wished not for the first time that she had a glass of water. "I didn't even know pirates still roamed the Atlantic this close to Europe. Sure, I've seen you guys on television robbing ships and taking prisoners in places like the Indian Ocean and off the coast of Africa, but I'll be damned if I ever expected to be taken hostage—mistake or not—this close to Great Britain."

He raised what looked like to her to be a blurry eyebrow. She thought she might have seen a momentary smirk on his face before it disappeared, but since she was basically blind without her very thick glasses, she couldn't be sure. Kneeling in front of her, he held something out for her to see. She looked down and joy filled her heart. He'd brought her glasses.

Opening them up, he pushed them onto her face awkwardly so that one side was too high over her ear and the other poked into the side of her head. But she didn't care. He'd given her back the gift of sight and now that she no longer looked at the world through a veil of unclear fog, the anger that had been hiding at the base of her spine rose inside of her threatening to spill out. Within moments, her cheeks burned.

Her ears hadn't deceived her. They were still in the middle of the ocean, or at least as far as she could stretch her head left and right, she couldn't see any land. But her own boat was missing from view too. Since they'd been travelling for what seemed like hours it was likely she was nowhere near anyone who could help her escape from the clutches of these lunatics.

In her wildest dreams, she'd never anticipated that anyone would actually kidnap her. But there they had been at dawn's break, bursting into her cabin like a herd of wild beasts, ripping her out of her bed, and forcing her off her science vessel and onto their ship. The whole experience had taken less than ten minutes. As far as she could tell, they'd left her crew entirely alone, which meant they'd been looking only for her. Or thought she would make the best victim in whatever outlandish plot this happened to be.

She hadn't been able to see who had actually taken her this morning, but she could now see the man who stood before her as clear as day. She swallowed. Even squatting down, it was obvious he was huge. If she'd run into him in a regular social situation she

would have avoided his presence, very tall men made her nervous. Given a choice, she preferred the men she associated with to be only a few inches taller than she was, coming in around five foot eight or so. Shaking her head, she forced herself back to the present. She needed to focus on getting off of the ship.

Hadley didn't know that much about boats—which was funny considering her family heritage—but she knew this one was huge. Maybe ninety plus feet, making it at least three times the size of the science vessel she'd been on. It had three giant masts, including the one she was currently tied to. She'd imagined boats like this when she read travel magazines. People rented vessels to take vacations and she'd fantasized they looked just like this one. Who knew she would end up being carried away to God knew where on something straight out of her imagination?

She had to look out over the horizon to see the ocean, which told her she was very high up. That meant that there were multiple floors between them and the ocean. Although she was no expert, she would guess it was somewhere between five to seven floors, maybe more. Wherever they were, they were on a significant vessel that required a large crew. Hadley took a deep breath knowing she was in big, big trouble.

"First of all, thank you for my glasses." She couldn't help it. Years of boarding school had driven manners into her psyche and right now they were all that kept her steady and sane. Why wasn't the man answering? "Aren't you going to say anything?"

Nothing irritated her more than being ignored, except maybe being humored. If he really wanted to watch her explode, he could pat her on the head and say something patronizing.

He shrugged. "You're welcome."

"That's not what I meant." She was pretty sure he knew to what she referred.

His laugh was a rich, warm caress over her shoulders, not a sensation she should be having while she sat in the blistering sun with her hands tied behind her back. Unless she had come down with Stockholm Syndrome. Was that possible? Could that happen in only a matter of hours?

"What makes you think I'm a pirate? Maybe I'm just a kidnapper looking for ransom from your father."

His accent was American, the first she'd heard in weeks, since she was the only non-British person onboard her science vessel. She would guess he was somewhere from the south. Being raised in New York City, all the southern American dialects sounded the same to her. His mention of her father did nothing to calm her nerves. Very few people actually knew who he was. For more years than she could imagine, her father had worked on secret government contracts to build weapons. Well, that was what she knew he did. Most people thought he ran a shipping company. Her sister, Hailey, still thought he built boats—the story he'd told them as children. But if this man knew who her father was, then it was likely he wasn't bringing him up because he was unhappy with the date of arrival of his manufactured shampoo products. She needed to stay calm, not give away that he'd just thrown her for a loop.

She smiled. "I think it must be the get-up you're wearing. It screams 'pirate'."

Why was she being so pleasant to this man? He and his crew had invaded her ship before the sun had risen this morning, terrified her crew, and literally stolen her from her bed, dragging her onto their boat. She still wore her pajamas. In all truthfulness, she should be glad she'd worn clothes to bed at all. Her quarters were right next to the boiler

room and some nights she had no choice but to sleep in the nude. Now, that would have been humiliating.

Five minutes ago, she'd been ready to gouge out his green eyes and now, because he'd brought her glasses to her, she was treating him with civility. She closed her eyes at her level of pathetic. Even with her feathers ruffled, she could never muster enough gumption to tell someone to fuck off.

"The get-up I'm wearing? It screams pirate?" His tone told her he was genuinely confused by what she'd just said to him. She let her eyes scan his body just to make sure she hadn't been wrong in her assessment and tried not to blush at the amused glint that lit his eyes.

Six foot three inches tall and all of him toned and fit, he looked like a man who knew how to handle himself in a fight. She wondered, not for the first time, what his name was. Stick-straight, dark brown hair hung to his shoulders; a look that might have seemed feminine on someone else, but on him said sex god.

But the lengthy hair was nothing in comparison to the rest of him. His face was long and chiseled, with black stubble covering his chin and cheeks. His eyes were almond-shaped and green like the color of the sea they currently swept across. Long eyelashes she couldn't help but envy covered them, as if they kept the secrets of his soul hidden from the world.

A sleeveless white shirt allowed her a view of the multitude of tattoos illustrated on his arms. The most noticeable was a giant black bird in mid-flight, which sat on the bicep of his left arm. His green pants stopped mid-calf, a look she wasn't used to seeing on grown men, and his feet were bare.

"You have to admit, you're purposely giving off a buccaneer look."

He frowned. "I am not. I'm dressed appropriately for a day at sea, that's all."

She shrugged and hissed when the ropes at her wrist dug into her skin. Well, that would teach her to try to be flippant while she was tied to the mast. Her captor rushed forward and loosened the restraints slightly. Before she could help herself, she sighed with relief and then wished she hadn't. If there was anything her father had taught her over the years, it was never let other people know you needed them. That gave them power over you.

When he finally finished fiddling with her ropes, he stood up again. "So Ms. Pettigrew, as I was saying..."

She interrupted him. "It's Dr. Pettigrew."

"What?"

"My name is Dr. Hadley Pettigrew. If you're going to use a title, use the right one." Normally, she didn't care if someone called her 'Hey you' but right now it seemed hugely important he know who she was, and maybe it would also subtly tell the man that she was not connected with her father in any way.

He nodded. "I knew that actually; guess I forgot. Fair enough, Hadley, we meant to kidnap Hailey. For that, I owe you an apology, but unfortunately there is nothing to be done about it now. So it looks like you're our captive."

Hadley swallowed. Given the choice, she would have preferred not to have been ripped from her ship but she certainly didn't want Hailey taken either. Her twin sister was nothing if not hysterical during the best of circumstances. No, it was certainly better that it be her, if it had to be either of them.

“Now what?”

“Pardon me?”

He seemed awfully polite for a pirate, or a kidnapper, or whatever he wanted to call himself. She suspected he hadn’t always been a bandit. In fact, he seemed more like a southern gentleman than anything else.

“Now what do we do? Are we just going to sail around in circles until my father pays you the money you want? Because I must tell you this is highly, and I mean highly, *disruptive* to my work. I may never get another chance to actually see the giant squid as easily as I can right now. I’d really like to be returned to my ship as soon as possible.”

“You’re looking for the giant squid in the northern Atlantic ocean? I thought they were off the coast of Japan.”

Okay, so he was educated too. She made a mental note of that fact in case she needed to know it later.

“That’s true, yes. The Japanese scientists did manage to get a photo of the squid in the Pacific waters. But there is every reason to believe the giant species is here, too. Just because they were the first to find it doesn’t mean that’s the only place it lives.”

He nodded. “I see. So the fact we kidnapped you *right now* is a very bad thing in your perspective? Is that your point, Hadley?”

She nodded. Something about the way he said her name made her stomach muscles clench. She had to admit, the man had a sexual chemistry she hadn’t been around in years. Under other circumstances, she would have sat across a room and quietly drooled over him for an entire night without ever having the nerve to approach him. Like she’d thought earlier, he was simply too tall to not be terrifying. At some point when he went home with someone else, she would have felt ridiculous and not gone out to another social event for months because of it.

Coming back from her thoughts, she realized she’d been silent far too long, a problem she often had. Communication, especially with good-looking men, never came easily for her and this was obviously not going to be an exception to the rule. “Yes, it will make things extremely difficult.”

“Good.”

Hadley gasped. “What?”

He laughed and this time it did not send shivers up her spine. “Let’s just say I intend to make it my business to make things as difficult for every member of the Pettigrew family as possible. We didn’t think we could get to you, Hadley, but now that we have, we’ll just consider it a gift of fate.”

“Two seconds ago you were apologizing to me.”

“That was before you told me my ‘get-up’ was akin to a pirate’s and showed me that it didn’t matter which Pettigrew sister we kidnapped—you’re both spoiled princesses too used to living off of Daddy’s money to know how to treat another human being with respect.”

“How dare you lecture me on protocol and manners while I am strapped to this goddamn mast, you arrogant monster. You don’t know the first thing about me.”

Yes, they’d been raised with money but if they hadn’t had each other than they would have had nothing more than that. Their mother had died giving birth to them and one string of nannies had come and go until they’d finally gone away to school. It had always made her crazy when someone presumed to know what kind of person she was

based only on the external counting of her father's money.

"And thank God for that." Her captor ran a hand over his stubble. "I know enough about your father to last me the rest of my life. I warned him this would happen if he didn't stop the tests. I told him I would get my revenge and now I intend to."

A slow spread of dread filled her stomach and she wished she could cry. This man was after revenge. That meant he wanted so much more than money. She'd be lucky to get out of here unmolested. Hell, she'd be lucky if she got out of here at all.

"So you're familiar with my father, then." She didn't ask it as a question. He'd mentioned her father twice. There was no point in acting dumb about it. Her voice sounded strained and she hoped he didn't hear it. She would never let him see her cry. Whatever happened, no matter how bad it got, she would never let him know. She didn't have much control left, but that much she would keep.

He nodded. "Your father and I are well acquainted, Hadley."

"Then he is more fortunate than I because you have yet to tell me your name" she responded haughtily.

"You can call me Hawk."

Like the bird on his left arm. It somehow seemed appropriate for him. She could imagine him with black wings, flying high in the sky, above the clouds.

She didn't want to question him about his name. At this moment, now that she knew it, she didn't want to know anything else about him. Ever.

"Are you going to kill me, Hawk, or rape me, or do something equally awful to me?" She was sure there were more sophisticated ways to ask what she needed to know but right at that moment she could barely make her mouth open and close to say the words. If he thought she was old fashioned and pathetic, then so be it.

He narrowed his eyes. "Where did you get a ridiculous idea like that?"

"You just said you wanted revenge against my father. I don't have to be terribly brilliant to know what that means. It makes sense that you would have wanted Hailey for that reason, too."

"You talk in so many circles, its making my head hurt."

He walked closer to her, standing well within her personal space. She tried to maintain the calm composure she'd promised herself but she feared the sweat that formed on her back had nothing to do with the heat of the sun and everything to do with terror.

"No one on this ship is going to force themselves on you, Dr. Pettigrew. No one. I wish I could say you will be leaving here unharmed, but I never tell a lie. But I can promise you when your father comes to get you, you will be sexually unharmed. That much I can swear."

"What do you mean I won't be unharmed?" Okay, now she truly was terrified. But at least she hadn't cried. That was something.

"It's better if you don't know. You'll be less afraid that way."

She didn't like the sound of that one bit. Her heart raced. "Hawk, please, whatever your fight is, it's with my father, not me. I'm just a scientist in search of a giant squid. I'm nothing, nobody. I haven't taken any money from my family in ten years. Okay—that's a lie—there was that one time nine years ago when I let my father pay to get me out of this stupid company where I was supposed to be selling knives and I couldn't stand it. He paid for the knives, but that was it."

"Sshh." He placed a steady hand on her shoulder. "I just promised you that you

would leave here alive and not be raped, isn't that enough to keep you calm?"

"No. You just said I *would be* harmed."

"We can survive anything, Hadley, I promise you that. If we live, we can survive."

There was no warmth in his eyes, no compassion, no understanding that what he just said would cause her any fear. It was more likely he *did* know and felt no remorse about it. "You're a monster, aren't you?"

He nodded. "I am the man your father made me. My whole crew is."

Hadley looked up. Hawk's whole crew, who she had not seen since they'd taken her that morning, stood staring at her. How long had they been there? She hadn't heard them approach. Come to think of it, she hadn't heard Hawk walk towards her earlier either. They must be the quietest sailors ever to grace the high seas.

"Now, I'm going to untie you, then without causing any trouble you are going to take my hand. I'm going to lead you down below to your quarters where we all feel you will be more comfortable until tonight."

He leaned over and untied her restraints. She should do something. The women in the movies always knew just what to do to try to escape. But she wasn't brave and she had no idea what kicking him in the balls would do to her situation. He'd already promised her pain and she hadn't done anything but be compliant. How awful would this so-called pain be? She didn't want to know.

"Hawk, please let me go and I'll make sure my father gives you whatever it is you want." She was too close to begging and it felt pathetic, but really what did she have to lose?

"Sorry, Dr. Pettigrew, but this is happening whether you want it to or not."

Chapter Two

Hawk rubbed the bird tattoo on his bicep. It ached, but that was no surprise. Everything in his body hurt most of the time, and always would. Silent as the predator he was, he walked quietly in the dimly lit cabin to stare at Hadley. It was his cabin most of the time, but she didn't need to know that. Despite what he was sure she was thinking about them, they weren't monsters and he wasn't going to tie her up in a jail cell. Not unless she became much more of a problem. So far, other than screaming and yelling—something he would have done much louder than she was if he was in the same situation—she'd been a relatively easy unwilling passenger on their ship. Even if she did try to run or claw at him he was fairly certain she could be easily restrained. It was better to simply leave her alone.

She slept soundly, as though it was the middle of the night and not the middle of the day, and he doubted he could wake her, even if he did accidentally make some noise.

He couldn't blame her. She'd been through an ordeal and once left alone in quiet quarters, it was no shock she'd all but passed out on the bed. Rest was good for her right now; tomorrow she would need it, if she was to survive what was to come.

He closed his eyes. How could they have made such a mistake? Or maybe it hadn't been an error; maybe Jeremiah had led them to her on purpose. Even after all this time together as compatriots, Hawk knew he'd never truly understand the other man's motivations. Maybe it was better that way.

Hailey would have been a better choice. It had been clear Hadley led a productive life, which had surprised him. A member of the Pettigrew family who wasn't devoting herself to the destruction of others was a rare find indeed. But now Hawk was going to end that usefulness and drag her into the unfriendly light of realization and pain.

He shrugged. It was no less than her father deserved. Honestly, they could have done ten times more to her father—Zacharias'—family and it still wouldn't have been proper retribution.

Unable to resist the urge, he knelt down next to her bed and touched her hair gently. It was soft, just as he knew it would be. When was the last time he'd seen red hair this color? He smiled in the darkness as he realized exactly when he had last seen it. The few weeks he had escorted Annabelle across the Sahara on camelback. It had looked just like this.

But it hadn't been soft. No, they'd both been dirty and disgusting by the time they'd reached their destination. Plus, he had found out later she'd already gotten sick, although he hadn't known it when they'd been riding around. He'd been too young to tell, too naive to know the difference. Pettigrew loved gene manipulation but his science was flawed. Eight generations to produce another redhead and this time the sick son-of-a-bitch had managed two at the same time.

But Hawk didn't get involved with the Pettigrew women anymore. He knew better. He would do this thing with Hadley and then he'd be through with them again.

A loud buzzing in his ear made him jump up. Damn. He looked down at Hadley, who slept soundly still, and rolled his eyes. Of course, she couldn't hear the sound. Why had he worried she would? Running out of the door of her cabin, he tried to keep his

footsteps light. He closed the door behind him and listened for a moment to see if he heard movement from her, but nothing seemed out of the ordinary.

He took the stairs to the deck two at a time and met Jeremiah at the top. Nodding briefly to the other man, he noted that Jeremiah had taken the afternoon to shave his head again. Someday he'd have to ask him why he bothered.

Shaking off his brief interlude, he got right to the point. "Did you get buzzed?"

Jeremiah shook his head and stared up the sky, worry passing over his blue eyes. "No, my prince. You did?"

Hawk nodded. He wasn't going to bother correcting the 'my prince' nonsense right now. It was pointless; his formerly blond-haired friend who was for today bald would never stop doing it.

They were out there, and it was more than one. That Jeremiah, and most likely the others, couldn't sense them yet didn't mean he'd been wrong. It was just another example of how heightened everything had gotten lately, especially for him.

Jeremiah barked orders loudly, instructing the others where they should be, what he thought was happening. Hawk reached out and grabbed his arm.

"Protect the Pettigrew woman. I won't lose her. We've come too far to turn back now."

The other man's eyes widened and Hawk nodded. It wasn't often he gave the other man such a direct order and he had no doubt it would be followed.

Hawk strode to the center of the deck, deliberately putting himself out in the open. If they wanted him, he was there. He could feel his pupils dilate and he smiled. Oh yes, they were out there and he itched for a good fight.

His youngest crewman, Stone, rushed towards him, grabbing his attention. "We took the wrong one, Hawk. Maybe we should give her back and go find the other."

He shook his head. "We'll never find the other one. They'll be gone forever now. Count on it. This is our last chance, period."

The air around him stirred and Hawk had two seconds to refocus himself before a gold streak of light shot in front of his face. Prize.

He swung around and reached forward, grabbing what seconds earlier had been thin air but now contained the body of a man twice his size and weight. Hawk didn't mind. He loved a good challenge.

"Ah." With every ounce of his strength, he pulled the newly arrived man into his body space. If Prize wanted a fight, he would get one.

"I see you're the same, Hawk."

Prize's voice sounded gruff, it was almost hard to hear him, the result of part of a grenade landing in his throat years earlier. Hawk had been responsible for that incident and hearing the trouble Prize had to utter his words always brought a smile to his face.

"I'm always well, as you know."

Hawk shoved the 300-pound near-giant backwards to get a better look at him. Same brown hair and perpetually tanned skin, same muscle mass, his brief inspection told Hawk nothing much had changed about Prize since their last encounter. That was good. It meant he still knew how to defeat him.

His opponent raised his hands as if in surrender but Hawk didn't let down his guard. He knew better. He'd been tricked too many times before.

"I come as a messenger, nothing more."

“Funny, they’d send you to deliver a message, considering you can barely speak.”

Prize narrowed his eyes, but didn’t move. Hawk suppressed his grin, knowing what the control cost his opponent. “They want her back. That is all. Give her back and we can return to normal.”

Hawk shook head. Not this time, not again. “Sorry, I’m not sure to what you are referring.”

“The Princess wants her back.”

“She could care less and you know it. It’s been a long time since she had anything to do with her children. But good try, just the same. Tell Pettigrew he’ll have to do better than that.”

“If you don’t give her back, we’ll take her back, by force.”

“Ha.” Hawk laughed, he couldn’t help it. The ridiculousness of that statement was more than he could handle. “Am I supposed to be afraid of that, Prize? The only person here who could be harmed by that encounter is the very same woman you claim to want to rescue.”

Prize moved forward, faster than Hawk could see but he’d anticipated it and jumped to the side. He lunged, colliding with the gold light as it streaked to the side. The impact forced Prize back into solid form as they both slid on the deck towards the guardrail and into the water.

The freezing Atlantic surrounded Hawk’s body but he made himself hold onto Prize. He wouldn’t lose him just because he was cold. Wrapping his arms around the bigger man’s neck, he held on while Prize attempted to bring on the light he mutated into and resurface at the same time.

They broke water together.

Teeth chattering, he still felt victorious. “You can’t shift as long as I have you, Prize-my-man.”

“I may not be able to shift to the light, but I can still destroy you.”

Prize launched them both into the sky, forcing them onto the deck again, rolling them over so he landed on Hawk. The crunching sound was the only indication Hawk had that his right rib had broken before the pain laced its way through his body. He rolled left, ignoring it, as he tried to get the huge mass off him.

“Bet *that* hurt, Hawky-boy.” It was the triumphant tone in the giant’s voice that made Hawk furious. Managing to pull his arm free, he elbowed Prize in the direct center of his neck. Prize made a choking sound and rolled away.

Hawk jumped to his feet and scanned the deck, keeping one hand on his aching rib. Without looking, he shook his head, letting Jeremiah, who he spotted five feet to the right, know not to interfere. There was no way Prize was there alone. The man was strong, but dumb, and he couldn’t have located their vessel by himself. That meant someone else watched.

Inside his body, his ribs began to knit together and he wanted desperately to bend over to relieve the pain. They’d be healed in moments, but they would hurt for days. He continued to scan the sky and wasn’t surprised when a large ball of flames appeared before him. It had been years since he’d last seen Wander but you didn’t forget something that disturbing. Hawk took a step back. He needed to handle this just right or they’d all get blown up, which would hurt tremendously, and then Hadley would be gone.

Wander continued to float in the air in front of Hawk, not yet taking form. “I thought

you guys said you were the good guys.” He’d always lisped his ‘s’ sound, which gave him the sound of a talking snake. It was a strange image, even for Hawk—a giant ball of fire that sounded like a talking snake.

“Good and evil are relative terms, as you know. We are still monumentally better than you.” Hawk ignored the sick feeling in his stomach. They’d made their decision to take Hadley, which meant they had to live with it.

“Good guys don’t steal women from their families.”

This was true and Hawk couldn’t deny it. “Then maybe we’re not the good guys anymore. No one is. But I’m still putting an end to it. You can tell Pettigrew that. After all of these years, it ends. I have his capabilities now. So he can give the Princess back to me or he can watch person after person that he cares about go through what Hadley is about to endure. I don’t care how many it takes. The Princess comes back and we leave.”

Wander’s fire image dissipated, leaving in its place the human form he often took. Dark haired and blue eyed, the women found him irresistible until they literally got burned. “I don’t know why you fight so hard to have her back. She’s not at all the same as you remember her. Not even a little bit.”

“She can return. It’s been too long under your care. If we get her home, it will change.”

“Nonsense.” Wander lifted bored eyes to the sky. “I’m not going to fight you, Hawk. We couldn’t win, not Prize and me by ourselves, not without risking her, and Pettigrew was clear—Hadley comes home. Seems the H girls are rather special to him. Must be something to do with them being twins. Fates now E, F, and G didn’t fare so well.” He shrugged his shoulders as Hawk forced the images of Emily, Fiona, and Grace from his mind. He couldn’t allow himself to think of them, it was fruitless.

“If you feel that way then why not join with us, Wander? We would welcome you, as you well know.”

He shook his head. “No, Hawk. I made my bed long ago as did you, even though you can’t yet see it.”

Hawk’s temper flared. “That’s not true and it’s a lousy excuse.”

“But Pettigrew did want me to express my seriousness. We will be watching you. We will get her back and there *will* be consequences if I don’t take her now.”

“Ha. I wouldn’t trust her with you and Prize for a short second.”

Wander raised an eyebrow. “Just moments ago you offered me friendship.”

This was getting ridiculous. “Consider it a onetime deal for old time’s sake. It won’t happen again.”

“Well, then this is a token of my esteem.”

Too late Hawk realized what was happening. Flames engulfed his body and he fell to the deck roaring with agony. How long? How long would the burning take? This was the one and only maneuver Pettigrew’s soldiers knew to completely incapacitate him. And dammit, he’d given Wander the opening he’d needed to execute it.

Off in the distance corner of his mind, he heard a female scream. Damn. Had Wander gotten to Hadley? The light in front of his eyes dimmed and he felt nothing but extreme peace.

He loved this essence of nothingness, not a sound, not a word, not a deed could interfere in the sheer peace he felt in this moment. Unshed tears came to his eyes. He could see *it*. In front of him, the home he’d foolishly left so long ago. The quiet red sky

atop blue oceans, his sister's laughing voice, and the peace that came with service to the king filled him with pleasure inside.

*

His eyes flew open to the vast blue green of the ocean in front of him. It was the wrong tint. He wasn't back home. Sitting up, he examined the deck. The sky was in the beginning stages of turning pink as the sun fought the moon for control of the horizon. His back ached and his skin stung like a thousand bees assaulted it.

Recovering from burning up was always one of the longest ordeals. The deck was empty of people, not a surprise. His men knew to leave him alone while he recovered, as he knew to do the same for them. Well meaning ministrations only reminded him of how alone in this world he truly was.

Someday he would go back through the veil with the Princess permanently and be among his own people, in his own dimension. He would never have to live in this sick, twisted version that the people here called reality.

His thoughts flew to Hadley. Had she been the female voice he'd heard scream in the distance? Had Wander and Prize taken her? Ignoring his pain, he leapt to his feet in search of some answers. Gripping the handle of the banister of the stairs, he limped down into the galley of the ship. His men sat, grim faced, each one looking more tired than the next.

"Hawk." Stone jumped to his feet first, his grin genuine. Hawk reached out to squeeze his shoulder. At some point they would all have to stop thinking of Stone as the kid in the group. He had reached maturity a long time ago and deserved to be treated as an equal.

Hawk turned his attention to Jeremiah. "Status on Hadley."

"She ran up top while you were fighting. I didn't notice until it was too late. I take full responsibility for that." With a wave of his hand, Hawk dismissed his apology. Other than physically restraining the woman, something he knew Jeremiah mentally incapable of, there was nothing the other man could have done.

"So Wander got her?" He closed his eyes. All the planning and the time and it was all for naught.

Jeremiah cleared his throat. "No, my prince. She saw you burn up by Wander's hand, screamed, tried to rush to you, Gideon restrained her, she then saw you start to regenerate, and fainted right down to the deck."

Hawk's eyes flew open. "So she's still here?"

Nodding, Jeremiah grinned. "Out cold in her quarters but still here."

"And she's a fainter." This didn't surprise Hawk in the least. Tomorrow, they'd use her to find what they needed and retrieve the Princess. If she wanted to be unconscious for the whole thing, so much the better.

Chapter Three

Hadley pressed her face up against the cool glass of the Giant Squid exhibit at the Mote Aquarium in Sarasota, her favorite place to think. The red skin of the giant creature glowed in the dark light of the tank. Hadley knew it couldn't really see her; the tank had been designed that way. As far as the creature was concerned, all around it was the pitch-blackness of the deepest parts of the ocean.

So why did it look like it *could* see her? Hadley fanned at her shirt; she was drenched with sweat and not sure how she had gotten soaked or so hot in the first place.

Why are you so upset? What do you think will happen?

Hadley jumped backwards, nearly stumbling over her own feet before catching herself, and peered around. No one, not another soul, was anywhere in the vicinity. Who had just said that?

I did. The squid waved its left front tentacle at her.

Hadley gasped. Dear heaven, the sea creature spoke to her. It was impossible, it shouldn't even be able to see her through the one-way glass and yet it had addressed her, twice.

Are you under the impression you're awake?

Blinking rapidly, Hadley couldn't stop the giggle that formed in her throat. Of course. It made perfect sense. She was having another incredibly vivid dream. None of this was real. No one had ever managed to capture a Giant Squid and have it live. The Mote had a dead white one on display, the one the Japanese scientists hadn't been able to keep alive, but not a live red one. Besides, when had she ever been to the Sarasota Aquarium and seen it this empty? Someone would be walking around, children would be screaming and grandparents would be looking at their watches.

"Phew."

She waited a beat and looked around again. Usually, this was where she woke up. Knowing that she dreamt always made the dream itself go away. Except nothing seemed to happen this time.

I thought you would be comfortable here, as opposed to visiting with me at the bottom of the ocean. I assure you, I find nothing about these surroundings particularly comfortable.

She shook her head. "I could see how this sort of arrangement might be a problem for you. I never thought you should be caged. There's always been something so remote, so otherworldly about your kind. We don't see you very often, most of the time we can't get a shot of you on our very high tech cameras and when we do catch a giant squid on a deep fishing line or net, you're dead by the time we pull you up."

Even though she was now perfectly cognizant of the fact that she was not really conversing with a creature of the sea, it seemed a natural thing to do under the circumstances.

I know you feel this way, which is why I am speaking with you now.

Hadley nodded as if she discussed these matters with a giant red squid all of the time.

So I will ask you again, why are you upset? What do you think will happen?

"I don't know, truly. I can't seem to make sense of anything right now. First, I'm

kidnapped by an incredibly handsome man, who says I'll live, but I'll experience pain, and the next thing I know he's engulfed in flames and regenerating before my eyes. I'm not sure how any of this is happening."

Hawk is a complicated creature. His nature is always in conflict with itself, but we do not believe he will actually hurt you.

Hadley stumbled to the brown bench behind her and sat down. "Who are we?"

The squids.

"Of course, the squids, obviously. Is it all the squids or just the giant ones?"

Are you trying to be obtuse?

"I never try to be obtuse. It just seems that my mind doesn't work like everyone else's."

There's a good reason for that, but I am not going to get into it right now.

Hadley huffed. It was bad when you couldn't even get your own dreams to cooperate with you. "Then what would you like to talk about?"

He's coming, Hadley, we'll talk again.

*

Hadley's eyes flew open and she stared unseeing for a moment into the darkness of the cabin. It wasn't the same room she'd slept in earlier. The bed felt significantly more comfortable, due in a large part, she quickly decided, to the fact that the mattress had fewer lumps. Her neck felt less stiff, which she quickly credited to the comfortable pillow beneath her head.

But her physical comfort did nothing to relieve the mental fear building in her mind. The last thing she remembered was fainting on the deck. Where the hell was she now?

"I moved you to my cabin ... well the cabin I've been using since you were technically in mine."

Hadley squealed and pushed herself back against the headboard of the bed. Recognizing it was Hawk's voice did not make her feel better. She'd watched the man regenerate from nothing more than dust on the ship's deck.

"Please don't screech. My head hurts enough as it."

Hawk stepped forward out of the back of the cabin towards the window that provided a little light. He looked exactly as he'd looked when she first met him, not at all like the charred marshmallow he'd become on the deck. As frightened as she was, she had to admit, he was the sexiest man she'd ever encountered.

If that's what he was—a man.

She swallowed. "What are you?"

He sighed and rubbed his forehead. "I had hoped not to have to explain it to you until after it was over."

"Look, I know I'm a prisoner here and you have plans that involve causing me pain, but I think I have a right to know. Whatever else you might deny me; don't you have the decency to at least allow me that?"

Hawk whirled around so his back was to her and stormed to the wall. He pressed his fist against the wall as if he wished he could pound on it. "You have no idea, no concept of what has been done to me. I have taken care of your family for eons and now I have been left with no choice but to do something that will cause you pain."

The muscles on his back bulged with tension and she knew they must be causing him discomfort. She shook her head. They were discussing his causing her pain, and she was

thinking about his back? What the hell was wrong with her?

She cleared her throat. "Hawk, if you expect me to care about something you've been doing for, quote, eons, unquote, for my family, think again. If you don't want to cause me pain, don't cause it. Seems simple to me."

"Does it now?" When he turned around his green eyes blazed with red fire. She sucked in her breath, but he either didn't care about her fear or he liked it as he advanced towards her bed. "*Nothing* is simple, Hadley Pettigrew. If you only understood just how complicated life actually was, you wouldn't sleep at night."

She stood up, her stance rigid. As far as she was concerned, the intimidation stopped now. "You talk in riddles, all clues and insinuations but nothing concrete. Then I come on deck and find you burning to death only you don't die, you regenerate and no one seems to be the least bit concerned about it, which makes me think that probably your entire crew can do the same thing. So what is it?" She stepped forward and poked a finger in his shoulder. "Huh? Are you some sort of genetically modified people who can't die?"

"I've been changed, but it wasn't through science." He turned his back on her again and she threw the pillow from the bed right at him. It wasn't okay for him to just turn his back every time he didn't want to discuss something.

Hawk spun around, an eyebrow raised and an amused look gleamed from his eyes. At least she knew he wasn't going to overreact to things like soft pillows hitting him from behind.

"That will teach me, I suppose, to turn my back on a *Pettigrew*."

"Why do you say my last name like that? What could my father have done to you?"

He nodded. "All right Hadley, I'll tell you the story and if you don't believe me I suppose it's your own doom."

"Start with why you can't die."

He crossed the room and sat down on a large chair. She could barely make out his face in the darkness, which she supposed had been the point of his placing distance between them. "I can die, just not here."

Standing with her hands on her hips didn't seem very natural when she wasn't in the middle of a confrontation with him. She sat on the bed, feeling insecure now that he wasn't near her. "Just not here on this boat?"

Looking around, Hadley didn't see anything different about the vessel. Maybe the whole thing was enclosed in some kind of electro-magnetic casing that altered the makeup of everyone on it. She gulped. What would that mean for her?

"In this dimension, this plane of existence, if you like."

Hadley's ears rang. "I was really hoping, like you can't believe, there was a scientific answer to this."

"Ha. I know that, Dr. Pettigrew, I'm sorry to disappoint." His amusement at her distress pricked her temper again, causing her head stop spinning and her anger to flare instead.

"Okay, for now I'm going to buy this dimension stuff. It's not my field of expertise. I study fish and marine life. So who am I to say that there aren't hundreds of other dimensions out there with people living in them?"

"Thousands that we can visit. More than that, if you count the ones the people from my dimension still aren't sure how to get to. It's all about multiples of twelve's. Twelve dimensions with twelve dimensions within each of them and twelve and so on and so

forth.”

She nodded. “Fine, thousands of dimensions and you’re now in this one, unable to die, with a vengeful plot against my father.”

“When you say it like that, it almost sounds simple.”

“I find that most things are when you get right down to the core of them.”

Rising, he moved toward the bed where she sat and placed himself next to her. She wasn’t sure what had prompted his move but the sudden warmth of his body next to hers made her want to gasp. Different dimension or not, Hawk’s presence did strange things to her libido.

He reached out to caress her hair and she felt sweat form on her neck. “It’s the details that make things interesting and they’re never simple. Like your hair, for example.”

Heat rose in her cheeks. Why did he have to bring up her hair? She’d always hated everything regarding her hair. “What about it?”

“It would be simple to say your hair is red. It is. If I wanted to simplify and describe it in one sentence I would say ‘Hadley Pettigrew has red hair.’ That is a true statement. But it doesn’t do it justice. More accurate would be for me to say something like ‘Hadley Pettigrew has the softest reddish-gold hair ever to grace the planet Earth in this dimension or any other.’ I could describe the way it curls on the ends, giving it the impression that it is always coiffed for a party or social event, even when she’s been abducted from her family.”

As he spoke, Hadley stared deeply into his eyes. Gone was the fire she saw earlier. Instead, she swam in their green depths and allowed herself to pretend for one moment that he really meant it when he saw her hair as red and gold and not actually as the color equivalent of spaghetti sauce. She made believe that he didn’t say exactly what she wanted to hear because he manipulated her for reasons she had yet to understand. For exactly ten seconds, she decided, it was okay to imagine she was the kind of woman for whom he would really mean the things he said.

Her brief fantastical interlude behind her, she blinked twice and tried to remember what the point of their conversation was, even though he smelled like fresh air and bay leaves. “So your point is that I summarized your situation too succinctly and ignored the details?”

He nodded, but didn’t stand up to move his spot, which made her wonder if she was about to have her head stroked again and tried not to notice how exciting the thought was.

“What are the details, then?” She hoped her cheeks were not as red as she feared they were.

“Two hundred and forty years ago, I was brought here as the leader of a large brigade of warriors whose sovereign duty it was to protect the Princess Zamara while she was on her lifetime’s trip. As was the case with all protectors before me, I was selected because of my ability to travel through dimensions with relative ease and few noticeable problems. But things went terribly wrong with Zamara. Now, we are stuck here while she breeds for your father, over and over again.”

Hadley grabbed his arm. What the hell had that meant? “Say that again. Breeds for my father? What does that mean?”

Her heart pounded. All of this sounded too strange to be real, but she’d never known her mother. Some of what he said would make sense based on things she already knew to

be odd about her family.

“It means that for the last two-and-one-half centuries, your father has kept my Princess, the woman who I am all but physically unable to abandon, in a drug induced delirium whereby every thirty or so years she feels compelled to *mate* with your father and produce heirs.”

“That’s impossible.” Hadley stood up and started to pace. “My father builds *boats* for god’s sake, okay, okay, that’s a lie, he builds weapons, I know that, but he’s a human being, he can’t live for two hundred and forty years.”

“He can, darling, he can. As long as he is feeding off of her energy, living in the nearby vicinity to her, he can live endlessly. Just as I know that you, as her daughter, denied of her presence, will die at the age of thirty.”

Chapter Four

Why had he told her she'd be dead at thirty? Hawk shook his head. What good had he thought it would do? If he could go back in time and undo something, that moment would be the one he would choose.

"You will be dead because of what your father did to you when you were born. He injects his offspring with a slow moving toxin that festers and eventually kills you around your thirtieth birthday."

He really needed to shut up. There was no point in telling Hadley these terrible truths. But to lie to her, to not inform her of everything she should know, felt wrong to him. Hadley was clearly special. She didn't behave like any Pettigrew he'd ever known, and including her father, he had now known nine. Having never met Hailey, he wouldn't count her. But everything he'd read on her surveillance report said she was more prototypical of a Pettigrew than Hadley.

Hadley's hands fisted at her sides. "You're lying. He loves me. He would never do anything to harm anyone he loved."

Hawk nodded. "He does love you, indeed, I would fathom that he loves you very deeply and that is why he is hoping you will live through the toxin. His deepest wish is that one of his children will take after their mother and adapt—alter—at the genetic level and be more like us than like a human of this dimension. Then he thinks he'd have the ultimate weapon—a near god-like creature that can't be killed and can be used for his own interests."

He sighed. "We're not controllable enough, you see. His legion only listen because they still feel loyal to the Princess; they could at any time change. You, one of his kin, *you* would be a whole different matter."

He'd watched Zacharias do this to his children for eight generations, but never did it bother him more than it did now to think of Hadley dead as the others were. She stood before him so vibrant, so present—but in less than a year her candle would be snuffed out and it would be time for Zamara to breed again. Only this time, he wouldn't let her. It had been his job for over two hundred years to protect this princess, it was time he found a better way to do it.

Hadley sat down in the chair he'd vacated and held her head in her hands. "Why am I believing any of this?"

"Because you watched me regenerate from dust yesterday and you're too brilliant to not recognize the truth when you have it laid out in front of you."

She lifted her head and one lone tear slipped from her left eye. A burning fury spread from Hawk's stomach to his entire body. She cried, and it was all his fault. He was the bastard who hadn't left her alone. She'd been out in the middle of the ocean doing what she loved, completely unaware that in six months she'd be gone, replaced by an infant to try again at a sick quest for genetic perfection, and he had ripped her from that world into his sick, twisted version of reality. He didn't know if he was angrier that she cried or that she'd soon be dead. He shook his head. There was no time for such thoughts.

He was the worst kind of monster.

Pounding his hand on the bedpost, he gave into his urge to scream. "Stop crying."

Anger worked better. He had no outlet for his grief, and he'd be damned if he backed out of what he started now. "All of this was done to you while you were too young to do a damned thing about it, so stop sniveling about eventualities you cannot control."

Hadley's eyes were wide as she looked up at him. Unlike her sisters, who were long dead and who had the Pettigrew brown eyes, her blue depths reminded him of home. Refusing to give into the desire to flinch, he cocked his head to the side and stared her down.

Without warning, the boat shook violently, sending them both crashing into the floor. What the hell was going on? He leapt to his feet only to be sent back to the floor, rolling uncontrollably to the left, and smacked into both Hadley and the wall. Her warm curves were a momentary respite from whatever happened around them, but he had no time to think such thoughts as he pulled them both to their feet and braced them against the cabin's wooden barricade that separated his cabin from Jeremiah's.

Acting on instinct, he pulled her tightly in his arms, determined to protect her from whatever—or whoever—had enough power to nearly capsize his ship. When he'd left Pettigrew's group, there had only been a few soldiers who could have pulled off such a feat. But they were all changing quickly, and he had no idea who held this kind of capability now.

"Are you hurt?" He could smell the vanilla scent that wafted from her hair, even as he contemplated whether it was better to stay in the cabin or make for the deck. Hadley was his first priority but he had no intention of letting his crew die while he hid in his quarters either. They'd all be pissed as hell at him when they regenerated.

She shook her head, indicating that she was fine, but he could feel her shake in his arms and he was acutely aware of how pale she had suddenly become.

The cabin door swung open and Hawk leaped forward, dropping Hadley, and allowed himself to deny gravity for a few seconds and float above the floor, a position that would hold a better vantage point for attacking whoever came through. Jeremiah rushed into the room first, followed by three of his crewmen.

Taking a deep breath, Hawk lowered to the floor. "Report."

Jeremiah laughed a hard cold sound. "You have no idea how bad it is out there, my prince. It looks like he sent the entire brigade."

"Impossible." Even Pettigrew couldn't be that stupid. "The only person he'd be killing here would be Hadley."

"I feared this would happen. She has a twin. Pettigrew must feel it's better to sacrifice one than risk exposure of his dirty deeds. He'll just wait and see if Hailey survives."

Behind him, Hadley made a choked sound that resembled the beginnings of a sob. There was no way in hell he could let this get to hysterics. He turned around, pointing a finger at her. "Get control of yourself, Hadley. Show a little backbone." Swinging around, he faced his crew again.

Jeremiah's eyebrows pressed close together, his face a mixture of horror and disbelief. "She's going through hell here, you could show some compassion."

Rage fumed through Hawk's body and it had nothing to do with the attack happening on the deck above them. His ears rang and for a moment a red glow actually filled the room. He slammed his body into Jeremiah's, forcing both of them against the wall.

"Don't you ever tell me how to speak to her." He tried to take deep breaths but he

clenched his teeth together so tightly he could barely open his mouth. "Am I clear?"

Jeremiah's eyes widened warily. He nodded his head in compliance. Hawk was just about to release him when he caught a glimmer in the other man's eye he shouldn't have seen there.

Satisfaction?

Just as suddenly as the first time, the boat shook violently, tipping to the right. Everyone tumbled to the opposite wall and Hawk lost all thought of punishing Jeremiah or figuring out what the strange emotion he'd seen in there meant.

His back stung from where he'd banged against the wall. He struggled to his feet searching for Hadley. Jeremiah had helped her up.

"My prince, there is no time, we will have to make the transition now."

Now? Hawk shook his head. It was too soon. It had been over two hundred years since he'd opened the portal for the Princess. It could be very complicated under the best of circumstances, and these were the worst possible conditions.

Not to mention that now they'd arrived at the moment, he didn't want Hadley to do it. Clarity hit Hawk like a Mack truck smacking into a brick wall. This entire endeavor had been a big mistake. He couldn't hurt Hadley in any way. It went against his code of honor, his ethics, and not to mention his very DNA that had been encoded at birth to protect the royal family and everything related to it. Hadley was, morally perverse creation or not, Zamara's daughter. Even though he'd known all this when they'd been making this plan, he found himself unable to complete it. Damn his conscience.

"Forget it. This was a mistake. I can't do it."

Jeremiah's eyes flared with heated anger. "After all of this, everything we've done to get here, suddenly you can't do it?"

"Could you?"

"If I could open the portal, I would. No, my prince, as your second it's my job to make sure you do your job. Open the portal."

"I'll open it, but I'm not pushing her through." He and his men would all go back in shame and disgrace but he wouldn't hurt Hadley, he wouldn't make her go through the conversion.

"Have you forgotten that if she stays here she will die in less than six months?"

Jeremiah's logic was faulty and Hawk wasn't going to fall for it. "She may die in six months over there, too."

"But at home they may be able to save her."

"If there is the slightest possibility that someone can fix this, then I want to go."

Hadley's stern, determined voice startled him and he swung around to look at her.

"You don't have the slightest idea what you are talking about."

The boat vibrated like a piece of popcorn in a kernel popper. In another moment, they might implode. Hawk couldn't even be sure exactly what they attack consisted of unless he went up top to look. If he had to guess, he'd say that at least three of Pettigrew's men were converting themselves into pure energy and striking the ship with the force of lightning. Eventually, they'd take too much of a pounding.

Ten of his men rushed through the door. It was a small cabin for so many people and he felt like a squished sardine.

Stone reached him first. "Hawk, we're sinking."

Glaring at the window showed him the grim truth of the situation. They were,

indeed, going down.

Hadley threw her hair over her right shoulder and Hawk would have sworn a red hue followed in the air behind the action. “I know the rest of you can live through anything but I’ll drown, so let’s do whatever it is that we need to do. I can’t give up this opportunity, not just for me, but for Hailey, too. She’s my sister. If there is a chance I can save her from whatever was done to us, then I have to do it.”

Hawk clenched his fists at his side. “I said no.”

“Open the damn portal, Hawk, or I’ll throw myself overboard, drown, and you’ll be responsible for ending my life instead of potentially saving it.”

Hell, the woman was insufferable. What was he supposed to do? He glared at Jeremiah, who stood stone faced as if he had nothing to say.

Water rushed through the door. There was no time left to waste. Stone cleared his throat. “We never agreed about who would stay behind to close it.”

“I will.” Jeremiah spoke loudly, as if he expected no rebuttal.

Hawk shook his head. “No, I will. I’ll open it, I’ll close it, you’ll bring her to Astor and tell the king what happened.”

Nodding, Jeremiah walked forward. “Are all the men wearing the beacons?”

Hawk had never seen Jeremiah agree to anything so quickly. He raised one eyebrow. What had prompted him to get so compliant all of a sudden? The boat shook again and Hawk nearly fell over as he attempted to pull his pocketknife out of his back pocket. He hadn’t been prepared to do this and he bumbled it in the worst possible way.

Hadley’s arms wrapped around his waist, and although he knew she only tried to steady herself from the shaking boat, he couldn’t say he was sorry to have her arms there. In a few moments, he might never see her again. He hadn’t lied when he’d said they couldn’t die here, but they could be contained. Burned into ashes and stored in a small confined place, like an urn or a box, where they didn’t have enough room to reform.

Hawk could only imagine the pain that would cause. His cells forever trying to reform and never being able to would be eternal agony. Confident that’s exactly what Pettigrew and the warriors who refused to end this nightmare would do to him as soon as he’d closed the portal, he would take whatever small pleasure Hadley’s body pressed close to his provided.

“What are you doing?” Her gaze never lifted from the weapon in his hand.

“I’m going to cut myself, deeply, until I bleed and then I’m going to cut you. We’re going to combine our blood. The uniting of our two life forces should open a portal. Jeremiah will walk through it, holding you. He holds on him a beacon, which will pull everyone else who wears the same beacon through the portal with him. When everyone is through, I will cut myself again. This time, since it is my blood alone, it will close.”

Hadley shook her head. “At another time I might be fascinated with the physics of this. But for now, I thought you said I was human. More like my father, which is why I will die. Why will my blood open a portal?”

He had to shout to be heard over the loud buzzing noise that had started on deck above them. It sounded like someone had started a huge machine. Hawk didn’t even want to begin to imagine what kind. “You have trace elements of the Princess’ blood in you. We know this because we tested the other seven sisters when they died. It should hopefully be enough. My blood can open the portal; the royal family’s—in other words, yours—keeps it open.”

Her eyes widened. “But...”

He had no time to continue to argue with her, grabbing her hand, he sliced her perfect peach skin with his old but still sharp knife, and tried not to wince when she screamed. He needed to remind himself that she was nothing but a spoiled Pettigrew and it was time she accepted her fate. So, why did he feel so sick and worried and why did it particularly bother him that his concern was not for his own men or his own safety?

Drops of red blood, the purest of its particular color, dripped from her hand as she bellowed as if she'd been stuck by a sword and not merely cut on the hand. Without a second thought, he sliced deeply into his own hand, barely feeling the pain as if it was no more than a bee sting or an annoyance he could quickly forget. Grabbing her hand, he pressed his own into hers and felt the surge of power enter his veins.

Soon. The portal would open soon.

Hadley gasped, her skin turning even paler. “Hawk, is this the pain you promised me?”

He shook his head. “So sorry, sweetheart, you haven’t even begun to know the torture that is to come.”

Chapter Five

Hadley watched in awe as a giant hole opened in the air to the left of where she and Hawk stood. It didn't look like anything she'd seen on television or in any science fiction movies. While it was clearly an opening, nothing dark or ominous seemed present, either lurking inside of it, or flowing through it. Rather, the brightest white light she'd ever seen clouded her vision.

Several of the crew around her gasped and applauded. She'd never learned their names, but in her defense she'd been their prisoner and there certainly hadn't been time. She pushed herself closer in Hawk's embrace. It was silly, really. He was the leader of the bunch and they'd all set out with one intention and that was to kidnap her and shove her through that opening in the universe, but somehow Hawk made her feel safe. Or at least *safer* than she was outside of his embrace.

"Jeremiah, move, you need to take her through the portal." Hawk sounded annoyed. His facial features were all scrunched up and it felt as though his body temperature had risen just in the short time she'd been pressed up against him.

"Send out the girl, and we won't box you, Hawk."

A voice from the top of the stairs filled the room and Hadley gasped. There was something so inhuman about the way it sounded. Robotic in its make-up, like it had never drawn a real breath. Hadley wasn't sure what it meant to be "boxed," but she was sure that these men, who were going to make her go to another dimension, but who seemed to be genuinely concerned for her and her mother, did not deserve to have whatever it was about to happen to them.

An orange glow filled the room, and Hadley cocked her head to the side, wondering how much weirder this whole experience could get before her head literally exploded. Hawk shoved her to the ground. She hit hard and her entire body shook from impact. Her body, already hot from the heat in the room, felt like it might implode from the sheer frenetic energy created by Hawk's body on top of hers.

Smoke filled the room, Hadley tried to raise her head but Hawk pushed it back down to the floor.

"Jeremiah, for all that is holy, come here and get Hadley and go through the entrance."

Hadley squirmed under Hawk. There had to be something she could do other than lie on the floor while Hawk guarded her body like she was some sort of valuable commodity he needed to get through the portal.

As she watched, Jeremiah rose from the floor and ran towards them. He dropped to the floor and rolled next to Hawk. Pulling the pin, no beacon—that's right it was called a beacon—from his shirt he shoved it onto Hawk's shirt.

Hawk jerked like Jeremiah had just stuck him with a sharp object. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Making you fulfill your destiny?"

Hawk snorted and coughed as he inhaled a ton of smoke filled air. "What are you some kind of prophet now?"

"Exactly."

As they lay on the floor, she could tell by the sheer number of footsteps she heard above them that an army was amassed above them. The boat was sinking, and the room they hid in had been fire bombed. Hadley wasn't sure how much more of this she could take.

"Hawk, while the two of you discuss these life altering issues, may I remind you that I am still perfectly capable of dying?"

"That's why you have to go right now, my lady." Jeremiah bowed his head. "And there is still the matter of your sister. We can't let her die. This is where it stops." The black smoke had gotten so thick she could barely see him. It was a good thing she could feel Hawk's heart beating or she would think it had stopped. "I've altered, Hawk, I'm changing like the others started to. I'm seeing pieces of the future and I know you are supposed to take this woman through the portal. *You*, not me. So get moving before she dies in this heat."

"Jeremiah, how will you avoid being boxed?" Hawk's voice sounded rough.

"Ha. Don't worry about me, my prince, I'm more resourceful than you can possibly imagine."

For a moment, silence filled the room, broken only by the sound of wood breaking as it split from the pressure of the water and the heat and flames of the fire. Hawk cleared his throat. "Alright, Hadley, I'm going to roll you under me and then you hold onto me tightly." His strong arms maneuvered her under him. "Harder, Hadley."

Hadley wasn't sure how much tighter she could hold him but she squeezed her fingers, despite the pain in her gashed hand, into the back of his shirt, hoping her nails didn't cut into his skin. "I'm going to lift you onto your feet. Follow me."

She nodded. "Okay." Whatever was coming her way, she was ready to move on to the next part because her current situation was dire at best.

"*This* was the part I said would hurt."

Hadley closed her eyes and did what he asked. He lifted her off the ground, his embrace was strong and she couldn't believe that anything would be too hard to handle if she just held on tight enough. He pushed her head down on his shoulder.

"Hadley, can you hear me?" He shouted, why hadn't she realized how loud the buzz in the room had gotten?

"I can." She coughed when she spoke but at least she'd answered.

"Know this. If I had this to do over again, I would have left you alone."

His words panged her heart and she wasn't sure why they'd bothered her so acutely. "But then I'd be dead in six months."

"I can't promise they can fix you on the other side of the portal."

"I know they can't fix me here."

While still safely ensconced in Hawk's arms, she felt him push them through what at first felt like nothing more than a thick batch of foggy air. It was dense and difficult to breathe. Hawk pressed his mouth down on top of her head. "Hold onto me." He'd already given her these instructions and since he didn't come off as a man who repeated himself very often, she felt sure what he said was very important.

Wondering if she was about to die, she pulled his mouth down to hers. For a moment, he seemed stunned, but then he kissed her back and for the mere seconds their embrace took, the troubles that had befallen her seemed to disappear. His mouth was warm and his breath sweet. The dark stubble that covered his face cut gently at her skin.

and caused little sparks of pleasure to surge through her body.

Wishing it could go on forever, but knowing it couldn't, she pulled her mouth from his reluctantly. He hadn't asked for an explanation but she felt compelled to give one. "If we're going to die, I needed to know what it felt like to kiss you. I should be embarrassed to admit this, but what the hell? I've had the strangest desires toward you since you first stormed into my bedroom."

"Hadley, I..." Whatever Hawk was about to say was left unsaid as a sharp, blinding pain pierced her body. She screamed out and he pulled her closer. Feeling his body tense, she suspected he felt the same agony she did. Had to give the man credit, he didn't utter a sound of protest.

"I'd like to tell you it will be over soon but it won't."

She wanted to laugh. In the brief time she'd known him, no one had ever been more blunt with her than Hawk.

She couldn't see anything. Pressed up against Hawk's shoulder she couldn't even see the white of his shirt. It was as if they existed in a state of nothingness with the exception of pain. Somehow the sting that consumed her had become palpable, a living, breathing thing that existed as much as she and Hawk did.

"What's happening?"

"I'm not sure of the science of it." From the sound of his voice, Hadley guessed that Hawk spoke through clenched teeth.

"Then give me the unscientific explanation."

She needed to hear his voice, anything to ground her so she didn't give into the urge to simply become part of the endless ache. Something told her, a voice she'd never heard before, but that now existed as clearly as her inner monologue, that she must not give into the pain. If she did so, she might never come back, never return to herself.

Listen to me, Hadley. It is virtually impossible to get your attention when you're awake. But pay attention. Do not lose yourself to this.

She knew that voice. It was the giant squid from her dreams. Oh god, now she was dreaming while she was awake. Unless, of course, she'd lost consciousness and just wasn't aware of it—which was entirely possible.

"What you're feeling, well, part of what we're both experiencing, is the fact that we're dragging twelve souls behind us. We are essentially acting like a magnet and pulling them along the path with us."

Hadley, so caught up in the voices she heard in her head, had all but forgotten that she'd asked Hawk to explain to her what happened.

"Everyone but Jeremiah." She didn't need to ask that as a question. As much as she didn't understand everything that transpired, she understood Jeremiah had insisted on staying behind in Hawk's place.

"It's so bizarre. I keep thinking we should feel like we're flying. But it doesn't. It feels like we're not moving at all, like we're suspended mid-air, and just surrounded by nothing but emptiness and pain."

Hawk shook his head and Hadley stared into his green depths. His eyes changed. They still looked green like the ocean, but it wasn't any sea she'd seen before in real life. The best description she could give of them was aquamarine. It was as if the word had been invented to describe Hawk's eyes. Still aware of the pain around her, there was some peace to be found in the closeness she shared with Hawk and the mystique of his

newly colored pupils.

“Ha. That’s an excellent description. Every transfer feels like this. It’s why I’ve never understood why the royal family sends their children out to do it as part of their becoming full-fledged adults.”

She wanted to sigh and cuddle into his embrace, but that would be ridiculous given the circumstances. She’d all but assaulted him once with her affection and he hadn’t said word one about it; she wouldn’t do it again.

“How can I understand you when you speak, if you’re from a different plane of existence?”

He raised a brown eyebrow as he looked at her. The shade of his hair changed as well. What had looked to be the darkest brown she’d ever seen now held shades of auburn and gold in it. She wondered remotely if her appearance altered as well.

“I’ve been speaking English.”

Hadley sighed. Once again he hadn’t followed her line of thinking. No one ever did, and her imaginary friend the Giant Squid had told her there was a good reason for that, but she’d be damned if she knew what that was. Or why she was listening to a manifestation from her dreams.

“I know you’re speaking English. Did you have to learn it when you first arrived two centuries ago?”

The thought of trying to learn the dialects and languages of an entirely different world made her stomach twist. Thinking it might be a bad idea to vomit at the current moment, she tried to swallow her fear. But the sourness remained despite her best efforts.

“I found that I could understand everything being said to me when we came over. I’m not sure why that was, but it was true for all of us. We’ll have to see what happens with you when we get there. They’ll know what to do with you in Astor.” He looked left and right and his hair came loose from its ponytail. She wished she could reach up and stroke it. “Okay, Hadley. We’re going down.”

As if his words made it happen, Hadley felt herself fall like a wingless bird. She looked down and saw that the ground rapidly approached. They were like a missile and their destination was the land below them. Unless something got in their way, they would plummet towards the ground until they hit and then compacted to their end as soon as they struck.

“Hawk, you do remember that I can die?”

He nodded. “I know and I can die here. But neither one of us is going to do that right now.”

Hadley’s temper flared and her cheeks heated. How the hell could he be so sure? At the speed they fell, they were going to hit hard. And his bones might be built to withstand such a thing, but hers weren’t built to be smashed like a bug on a windshield. She heard herself start to scream and closed her eyes as she prepared to have all of her molecules collide in a fatal traffic jam.

She landed softly on her rear end, Hawk’s arms still around her. Opening one eye first, she dared to glance around to see where she was. Hawk released her gently and she opened the other eye.

They were in some kind of field, a grassy one. But it didn’t look or feel like any grass she’d ever seen before, being orange. Neither the corn stalks nor the dead fields she’d sometimes seen on her travels looked like this. She shook her head. Truly, she

didn't care. Everything could be completely different for all it mattered. They hadn't gone splat on the ground. How was that even possible?

She whirled around, intending to ask Hawk that very question, but stopped short. He stood up; his hands lay at his sides. He stared off in the distance at a purple mountain range covered in what she hoped was snow as it was white. It would be nice to have some things the same. His expression was passive. He neither smiled nor frowned. But his eyes, which she had spent so much time examining in the last few moments, glistened with what she could only guess were unshed tears.

She swallowed, and tried to remain perfectly still. This man who she hardly knew but who she was already fascinated with, more than any other being she'd ever come across, had been away from his home for two centuries in an attempt to protect her mother. Hadley looked down at the ground. Would she ever see her home again?

Turning as quietly as she could muster, she walked to the lake that lay five feet away from where they'd landed. The water looked the same, just a deeper blue. Running a hand through her hair, she gasped. Who the hell was that?

She bent over closer to get a better look. Her hair, still red and wavy, looked golden instead of its usual carrot appearance. Freckles no longer marred her nose and her skin had taken on a creamy hue she'd only seen on Barbie dolls she'd been given as a child. She looked down, oh wow, her breasts were huge.

"What are you staring at?"

Hadley jumped at the sound of Hawk's voice and her cheeks warmed. Had he seen her staring at her own boobs?

"I can't get over the change in my appearance."

Hawk moved to the left as he examined her. "What are you talking about? You look exactly the same as you always did."

Great, so he thought she looked awful. It was obviously too much to hope she might be attractive to him.

A loud boom sounded behind them and they both swung around, Hawk shoving her behind him.

"Stone?" Hawk stepped forward as more booms rang the ground.

Stone jumped to his feet, as unaffected by the landing as they had been. "Hawk, Lady Hadley, are you both well?"

Hadley shrugged. She had no idea if she was fine. But she supposed she was about to find out.

Chapter Six

Hawk did a quick head count. All of his men were accounted for and they stood up as if nothing happened. He needed to say something to them about this significant moment. They were back home for the first time in more years than he cared to count, but they left the Princess and half of their entourage behind. This should have all but physically destroyed them, but it didn't, and that bothered Hawk more than he cared to admit.

Why were they still all functioning this far from the princesses' presence? Their blood oaths should have made it next to impossible to leave her without pain.

Water splashing in the lake behind him broke into his preoccupation. He turned around to look at what happened. Hadley sucked in her breath and Hawk suppressed a smile. There would be some things here that would be completely new, awe inspiring to her, just as he had felt when he'd first arrived in her dimension.

A crocodile climbed from the bank of the lake and stood up on two feet. The bracelet attached to his front left leg identified him as a messenger. Hawk nodded. So their reemergence had not gone unnoticed.

"You are sent the warmest greetings from the royal family, Prince Hawk. They have long awaited your arrival. Although they are most disappointed to see you do not have the Princess with you, they are gratified to see you have the Lady Hadley with you."

"Hawk?" Hadley's voice shook which tore at his insides, and he placed a hand on her arm to pull her close.

It had been so long since he'd addressed anyone of importance, and speaking to the crocodile was the equivalent of speaking to the King himself. "I am surprised, master crocodile, to hear that the royal family knows of our struggles, as we've felt all but alone on Earth for some time now. I have returned with Hadley for many reasons. Please assure them it is my every intention to go back and retrieve the Princess, once a plan can be worked out for her safe recovery."

The green-skinned crocodile dropped to four legs, swung toward the water and slipped beneath the surface with barely a ripple.

Hadley's eyes were huge as she addressed Hawk. "Can all animals speak here?"

"The royal family has long been able to control and connect with the animals. It only spoke to me because one of them told it to. If I were to run into the croc on the road, it wouldn't act any different with me than it did in your dimension."

Hawk turned to his men. "While it is good to be back, it is clear we will have to make our way straight to Astor."

His men nodded, which gave him no little amount of relief. When he'd assumed they would all be half dead upon arrival due to the lack of the Princess, he'd known he could count on them to go to Astor. But now, when they all seemed relatively intact, he'd worried that they would immediately wish to return to their homes and families.

Strangely enough, Hawk didn't feel the urge to go to his home either. His eyes flew to the back of Hadley's golden red hair. She walked a distance away, arms crossed in front of her, as she studied the ground. Resisting the urge to follow in her wake, he turned to his men. Why were they not all half-dead?

He could still remember the day, over two centuries ago, when he'd sworn the blood oath to keep Zamara safe. They all had. That very oath should have made it impossible for them to leave her without becoming nearly dead. He'd seen members of his people shrivel into nothing more than stumps for the betrayal of a blood oath. Yet here he stood as if nothing had gone wrong and Zamara stood next to him.

"We've left the Princess behind and while the physical manifestations we all anticipated have not happened, I hope you will join me in vowing today to not let this be the end. We will recover the Princess and our men who are losing themselves in that place, and return here together. We have a day's journey ahead of us and already the sun sets. So let's make way in the direction of my parents' home and spend the night there."

Stone stepped forward. "Lady Hadley, might I assist you on the road? It is a treacherous journey and I wouldn't want you to get hurt."

She smiled briefly before the show of happiness wobbled and disappeared as she stepped forward. Inside Hawk roared. No one should be helping her with anything but him. He'd gone and gotten her and he'd brought her here. She was *his* to protect. But he didn't dare interfere in his men's relationship with her. Until they deposited her at Astor for the Royal Family to either cure or let die, he needed them all to care what happened to her.

Trying visibly not to flinch when she took Stone's hand, Hawk marched ahead of the group, hoping his mother wouldn't care that he'd arrived home with twelve hungry men and a soon-to-be dead member of the royal family.

Of course, the King of the guard might end Hawk's life as well for leaving Princess Zamara behind. But he wouldn't blame the guard King for that. He just hoped whomever they sent to replace him did a better job than he had done at retrieving her. He should have never been sent out as prince of guards two centuries ago. He was not ready for the task.

"Hawk." Hadley's voice stopped him mid-stride.

"Hadley?"

He'd noticed the others had started calling her Lady Hadley. He couldn't bring himself to do that. Maybe he never would. He understood intellectually that she was the daughter of the Princess, but to him she might always be entirely Pettigrew's creation.

"I've been asking Stone here some questions but he and the other men are reluctant to answer any without your permission. Do they have it?"

Stone and the others answering her questions. He wanted to scream out a denial that no it wasn't okay. Anything she needed to know, he would tell her. But that was ridiculous and she certainly didn't belong to him.

He cleared his throat. "Perhaps it would be better if I answered your questions." Damn it. Sooner or later he'd have to learn control around this woman and he wasn't going to dwell on the reasons why he seemed unable to do so easily.

"All right. So I'll walk with you." Did he imagine that her face brightened when she said that? She looked at Stone and graced him with a smile Hawk wished she'd given to him. All dimples and pure white teeth. He sighed and hoped no one noticed his reaction.

When she reached him, he took her hand. Stone had been right, the roads were treacherous. Much worse than he remembered them. Huge potholes the size of small cars back on earth lined the street and tree branches crisscrossed everywhere, making it easy, especially in the dark, to take a fatal fall.

“So, is this a pre-technological society? Where are all the cars and modes of transportation?”

That had not been what he’d expected her to ask. He grinned, unable to squelch the urge. Her strange thought processes had started to amuse him. If there was one thing he could count on with her, it was that he never knew exactly what she thought or what was about to come out of her mouth.

She shook off his grip and put her hands on her hips as she glared at him. “I can tell you’re laughing at me inside, Hawk. I don’t see what is funny. It’s a perfectly legitimate question.”

He nodded. “It is a valid question. But, it wasn’t one of the ones I expected you to ask. There are a million things happening to you and you’re wondering about cars.”

“Someday I’ll meet someone who thinks like I do.”

He laughed, hard, and was shocked by it. “Ha. And then heavens help us all.” Trying to recover his sensibility, he forced himself to get serious and less jovial. It must be that he was finally home. “We are a *post*-technological society.”

She shook her head, her eyes narrowing. He reached out and touched the side of her eye. Her skin felt soft under his rough fingers. “Sorry, you had a leaf on you.” Inwardly he chided himself for being a liar.

“By post-technological you mean that you once had technology and now you have abandoned it? Why on earth would you do that?”

“Why on *earth* indeed?”

She giggled. “I guess I’m going to have to get used to not saying that anymore. What is this place called?”

Hawk looked up at the sky, the sun would go down momentarily and then he’d get to see the stars the way he’d dreamed of them for the last two centuries. “Our main capital is called Astor. We will arrive tomorrow. There is some advanced electrical equipment there. Some things you’ll be familiar with, some things you will not. We call this dimension Haven.”

“Haven, okay.” She nodded as if she understood that information. “So I’ll have to say why on *Haven* would you want to do that?”

“Exactly.”

“So here on Haven, let me get this straight, you’ve moved past technology?”

Hawk shrugged. “I don’t mean to sound dismissive or uninterested in this but it all happened before I was born, centuries prior to my being even a glimmer in anyone’s eyes.”

“But surely you must have heard stories. There was a time when you used cars, boats, buses, whatever, and now you don’t.”

“We found that we could do most of the things computers did for us better, by using our own brains. It just took tapping into our untouched potential. Children are instructed differently now. They discovered that by teaching both the physical and the metaphysical, it awakened something inside of us. There stopped being a reason to get places so fast. It was better, healthier, to walk when we could. In the event that something needs to be immediately transported, then we do have a system for that. Or at least we did. Two centuries, a lot can change, even here.”

Hadley sighed. “I have so many questions and I don’t want to ask them because I’m terrified about what it will do to me to hear the answers, how it will change things...”

Hawk spun her around in his arms until she faced him. "Listen to me Hadley, I have known Pettigrews for some time now and you are totally unique. Different from any before you." He shook his head and for a moment Hadley's face morphed into another face he'd once stared at every day. Looking at Annabelle had brought him tremendous pleasure, but if he was honest, she was not as striking as Hadley. He supposed he should feel guilty for thinking such things, but the pang in his heart he expected to feel never appeared.

"Why, because I have a job and interests that don't pertain to my father or my family? How many children does my mother have?"

"You and Hailey are eight and nine. Zacharias likes to name after the alphabet. They started with Annabelle, Bethany, Candace, Deirdre, Eugenia, Felicia, Grace, and now you and Hailey."

Hadley sucked in her breath. "He's always liked systems, codes, filing. It's how he keeps track of things. Dear god, he treated us as if we were lab specimens. A through H and then when we're gone he'll come up with an 'I' name."

Above them, the high-pitched screech of a large bird startled him. Five large hawks roughly the size of small two person airplanes dipped and dove in as they circled above. Hawk had to smile. It had been too long since he'd seen his namesakes. Hadley would never have seen any so large except in pictures of prehistoric birds from Earth. He smiled as he glanced down on her face. Her head turned upward as she marveled at the sight above them in the sky.

The long line of her neck stretched so he could admire her creamy white skin. There was nothing he'd like better than to lean down and bite her there, make her squeal for a few moments, before kissing away any discomfort she might feel from the act.

"Hawk." Her mouth hung open like she might like to say something else but couldn't come up with the words. Instead, she just pointed upwards at the circling birds.

"They're mine. Or maybe, they're descendents of my flock. I don't know."

His family would have tried to keep his birds alive, keep them breeding and thriving. But he would miss the group he'd left behind. One particular bird that he'd named Truffle because of his affinity for killing mice in Truffle fields had been particularly talented and devoted to him.

He'd spent the last two and a half centuries avoiding thoughts like the one that was about to overtake him. He shook his head. There was no time for this. The job wasn't done yet.

"My prince." Stone called his attention and Hawk glanced at the younger warrior. All of his men looked in awe at the birds. Hawk cleared his throat. Evidently now that they were in Haven they were all going to revert back to his title.

"Yes, Master Stone?" If they were going to be formal, so would he.

Stone raised an eyebrow, his amused expression shown by the dimples shining on his face. It didn't matter how old the man got, he would always look ten.

"Who called your hawks?"

Hawk shook his head. "I have no idea, but someone with that knowledge must be aware we are home." His best guess would be a member of his family had sent them as a means of transportation and greeting. Unless something had changed significantly and others now controlled his birds.

"Those creatures." Hadley pointed at the sky and he noted that her voice shook.

“Belong to you?”

“Do they make you nervous, Hadley?”

The woman pursued giant squid as her profession and she shook at the sight of his birds?

“I don’t like things with claws. I never have. Give me tentacles, swimming, and electric shocks any day of the week.” She tried to smile and failed. It ended up looking like a grimace instead.

“If you cannot overcome your fear we will have to walk. It will take twice the time.”

“So not only do those things belong to you but you mean for us to travel with them up there?”

“You might say *they* are our alternate mode of travel.” He nodded as he felt himself lifted from the ground by a giant claw. Hadley shrieked but the biggest bird grabbed and secured her. Silently, each of his men lifted off the ground. One of them let out an audible sigh. Hawk understood that sigh. It felt good to be home, but his job was half done. He couldn’t have thoughts of home yet, not until job was done and he returned permanently.

“Now is going to be one of those times when you get to overcome a fear, Hadley. It’s a rare gift in life. Try to enjoy it.” He knew he taunted her but he couldn’t help himself. Part of him liked to goad her.

“Drop dead, Hawk.”

Chapter Seven

Hadley had always hated heights. She closed her eyes tightly and silently cursed herself for doing so. Missing opportunities was not something she regularly did and this was a perfect one to get a better look at the landscape beneath them. But hell, she couldn't do it. No way, no how. The stupid bird that carried them and right now had her wrapped tightly within its three claws might decide at anytime to drop them and this time she was sure she would go *splat* on the ground.

"So like those deep dwellers you're so interested in, you're more a creature of the sea than of the sky?"

She reluctantly opened her eyes at Hawk's ridiculous question. "I don't consider myself a *creature* of anything."

Hawk snorted and she tried not to grin. There was something so disarming about the man when he let his guard down. Clearly, he preferred the sky. He'd never been this relaxed the entire time they'd been on the boat, although admittedly he had been kidnapping her at the time. She was relieved that they shared a bird. Even though she liked most of the men she'd met, Hawk was the only one who intrigued her and then, of course, there was the small matter of how her heart beat faster when he looked at her straight in the eyes. She swallowed.

He cut a fine image. The wind blew his long black and auburn hair from his face and his eyes glistened. She'd always thought they resembled the sea but she could see now that, in fact, they matched the colors of the stars in this dimension perfectly. As the sun set earlier, she'd been gifted with millions of green stars. Hawk turned his head to the side.

"What are you thinking, Hadley? For a moment, I had you smiling. Are you going to vomit?"

She rolled her eyes. "That's charming, Hawk. Thank you for that image."

"I got that look off of your face."

"What look?"

He stretched and the giant bird shifted its claw to accommodate him better. The man then had the nerve to yawn. "The one that says you're thinking too hard."

"I'm in another dimension, for goodness sake. I'm entitled to over think things in these circumstances." She had no idea why she felt the need to justify herself to him.

"There's going to be plenty of time to worry." His eyes clouded over for a moment. "Trust me. But for now, enjoy the breeze and the wonder of this. I started to believe I would never know this small joy again. Now, even if I don't return from rescuing the Princess, I had this moment."

She smiled. She still hated everything about this, but she liked the peaceful line of his neck muscles and the way the small lines near his eyes seemed to lessen. Shaking her head, she forced herself to stop considering Hawk as if he belonged to her. Who cared if most of the time he was stressed? All she needed to focus on was getting to the people who could cure her so she could go back and fix Hailey.

"This bird here," Hawk's voice broke her from her reverie. "He is either the son or the grandson of one of the birds I had when I left here two centuries ago. I recognize the

markings. They're very unusual."

Hadley hadn't really bothered to look in her state of shock and distress to examine the animal. She looked at it now. The bird, mostly black and white on its head and wingspan, had an array of spots on its back that ranged from blue to red in color. She'd never looked up the subject but if she had to wager a guess, she'd say that on Earth, there weren't blue hawks flying around.

"So you train birds?"

He nodded. "Among other things, but yes, hawks are my specialty."

"Is that how you got your nickname?"

"Hawk isn't my nickname, it's my actual name." The wind picked up around them and Hawk raised his voice to continue speaking. "We all have an animal here. Only the Royals can make them talk but we all have one that is special to each of us. When a baby is born, the parents make a trek to Astor and one of the Royals reads the baby's aura and tells the parent what animal they're connected to. My parents were told it was a Hawk and not being particularly creative called me Hawk. My brother's name is Dragon and my sister is Rabbit. Some parents just take the first initial. Like Jeremiah is Jaguar and Zamara is the Zebras."

"What is Stone?"

Hawk narrowed his eyes. "Why are you so interested in Stone?"

What the hell was he talking about? Hadley sighed. "I'm not following your line of thought, Hawk. Have I given some sort of indication that I have a preference for Stone?" Hadley struggled to turn around to look at the aforementioned member of Hawk's crew. After a moment, the giant bird seemed to get the idea and adjusted its claw so she could see. Stone and three other men were right behind them in another, remarkably even bigger bird's claw. They chatted away, completely unaware of her focus.

"You held his hand when you walked down the road."

She shrugged. "He offered it to me. I didn't want to trip."

"You could have refused it."

"And you say *I* talk in circles?" Hadley's head started to spin and she didn't think it had anything to do with bird travel or heights. "I had no reason not to accept his hand. Is there some rule I should have been made aware of? Have I committed a crime? Can a man not help a woman walk through a rocky, pit-filled road without bringing on the ire of his leader?"

"You could have held my hand."

"You didn't offer it to me."

"I might have in another second."

Hadley opened her mouth to rebut but her breath clogged in her throat. Hawk was jealous. It wasn't even a question. He was upset because Stone had held her hand and it bothered him. It was High School 101. Why hadn't she noticed it earlier? She rolled her eyes. Simple answer, because men, especially men who looked like Hawk, didn't get jealous over her. Maybe he was just like this with all women or maybe it had something to do with him being the leader and not liking one of his underlings getting attention he wasn't getting.

The whole thing was so preposterous. She wasn't interested in Stone, or any other warrior, other than in a purely intellectual, friendly manner. Other than Hawk, at least, who in addition to irritating the hell out of her made her feel strange and sort of soft

inside in a way she couldn't quite articulate.

"Forget it, I'm acting insane."

Hadley was glad Hawk had said something because she wasn't sure what she would have done if he hadn't. Was it appropriate under these very strange circumstances to ask a man if he was interested in you?

"It's very rare, but every once in a while, a baby is born who has an affinity towards nature that has nothing to do with animals. Hence Stone's name."

Stones? What could he possibly do with stones? "What use could that be?"

"I've seen him pile them up miles in the sky with merely a thought. It can be useful."

"So it's like psychokinesis then?"

"Some people say telekinesis, but yes, same idea, only his power only works with rocks. He couldn't lift and move a book off a table unless it was on top of a rock."

Hadley's mind swirled with the possibilities. How far did this talent of his extend? The earth was made of an outer shell of rock. Could he have removed the outer core of the earth while he was there? How about here? Was it the same? Did he have to learn to control his abilities when he was a child?

She stared at the ground, trying desperately to see if she could tell if there was a rock surface beneath them but she was up too high and it was too dark. She couldn't tell.

Damn.

"It's amazing you find Stone's ability to manipulate so much more fascinating than my affinity to Hawks."

Alright, that was enough. Hadley raised her right eyebrow. "Hawk, are you jealous?"

"Yes, damn it, I am jealous and I have no idea why that is."

"You're jealous but you have no idea why." It was strange. The best looking man she'd ever seen, let alone known, had just admitted that he was jealous because Stone had held her hand and she'd shown platonic interest in him. Yet Hawk had no idea why he was upset. The idea that he could be attracted to her didn't seem to have entered his mind.

Was she that repulsive to look at?

"You look like I just hit you over the head."

"I don't suppose you could realize that what you just said was incredibly insulting? I know I can't be anywhere near as beautiful as the women you're used to being with, but you don't have to act like the idea that you might be jealous because of some sort of attraction to me is so completely out of the realm of possibility." She hated the tears that threatened to spill out of her eyes. She blinked a few times and was pleased when the feeling passed.

"What do you know about the women I've been with? And why would you assume I insulted you?"

"Hawk, you're not listening." She didn't care that now she shouted much too loud to be justified by the sound of the wind.

"I am listening Hadley, but as usual I have no idea what the hell you are talking about."

"No." She stomped her foot inside the hawk's claw and the creature screeched. She grimaced. There was no point in hurting the poor thing just because she was ticked.

"You're super smart. I can see that about you and I'm not saying someone has to be smart to understand me, not at all. But I think you'd be the kind of person who could

understand anything he set his mind to. No one has understood me, not ever. But I think the reason I feel so drawn to you is because I know you can.”

“That’s just it. I’m not sure I want to understand you, girl. I knew a Pettigrew once, knew her better than she knew herself and then she was dead, left nothing but ash. I can’t let myself know you, not now, not ever. I hope the Royals can fix you but if they can’t, you’re still just a means to an end to me.”

Hawk’s words struck Hadley like a gunshot. Over the course of her life she had never felt as used as she had over the last twenty-four hours. It felt as if he’d ripped open her insides. Her father had bred her to conduct some kind of experiment. If she failed the test she’d be dead and then this man—the most physically perfect man she’d ever seen—had used her to open a portal so he could get home.

She closed her eyes.

“I didn’t mean that.”

She opened her eyes, steeling herself to be unaffected by him. Somehow it had to be possible. “Sure you did. You said it. Don’t patronize me by pretending you didn’t mean every word you said. You don’t want to know me? Fine. I don’t want to know you either and as soon as this god-forsaken bird puts us on solid ground, I can assure you, I will find a way to never be in your presence again. Alive or dead.”

Hawk opened his mouth to speak but she never gave him the chance to continue as she wedged herself deep into the giant creature’s claw so she couldn’t see him, and more importantly he couldn’t see her.

She’d had enough. Choosing to walk through a portal to another dimension should have given her strength, not made her feel weak ... weaker than she had as a child when she’d lay in bed and begged for help with her fever and no one had come. Hadley’s eyes blinked uncontrollably. That entire incident suddenly made more sense. Her father, whom she’d always believed loved her as much as he was capable, had wanted to see how she handled illness, how her immune system worked.

“Hadley.”

She shrieked and gripped onto the bird for dear life. Hawk clung to the outside of the claw that held her. One arm wrapped around what she assumed was the hawk’s anklebone.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“I can’t leave things as they are. You’re right; I need to take responsibility for what I said. I wanted to hurt you so I did, but it’s more complicated than that.”

“First of all, come down from there. I can’t talk to you while I think you’re going to fall.”

He shook his head. “I’m not going to fall.”

Her heart pounded in her chest. Oh dear, she was going to have a panic attack if he didn’t come down from his perch. “Please get off the poor thing’s ankle and just join me in here.”

“I would but our transportation seems to be declining to let me in.”

“What?”

“The hawk is refusing to open its claw. It’s mad at me because of what I said to you. Maybe you could tell him its okay to let me in.”

“You want me to talk to it?”

“Yes. He understands you.”

She cleared her throat. "Thank you for caring that he acted like such a jerk. But it's okay to let him in now."

The bird loosened its grip on her enough to let Hawk slip in to sit with her. "I haven't been fair. I haven't told you the truth."

"The truth?" She felt like a parrot because she needed to repeat nearly everything he said to understand him. It was ridiculous that he claimed she spoke in circles; it was he who was impossible to understand.

"I can't let myself know you because I was once in love with your older sister. When she died—let me rephrase that, when she was killed by the poison your father used on her, something inside me shattered. It was terrible in so many ways; death was not something I was prepared for. I assumed she'd be like Zamara since she was her daughter, and we live much longer than you."

Hadley had never thought of those other women who came before her as her sisters and the word stung her eyes and caused pain in her stomach. They *were* her sisters, as much as Hailey was, and they were dead when they should have lived long lives.

"Which one was she, A through G?" She swallowed, her mouth felt dry.

"A. Her name was Annabelle and she was a redhead like you. Well, sort of like you."

Hadley didn't like being compared unfavorably to anyone but she supposed she could forgive it since he'd loved the woman.

"I'm sorry for your loss, Hawk. Some time you should tell me about her. But, I think it just confirms what I already knew. You and I should spend as little time together as possible."

He nodded, although she thought she saw regret in his eyes. She chose to ignore that while she pretended her own words hadn't caused her so much distress she couldn't breathe.

It was completely wrong to feel jealous of one's dead sister.

Chapter Eight

As the giant bird landed in front of his childhood home, balancing perfectly on its ankles as only trained carriers could do, Hawk should have felt a thrill by the bird's skill, would have, if his thoughts were not otherwise occupied. Hadley had done her best impression of a mute for the remainder of the trip. She was either very angry with him or so hurt she just couldn't utter words. The truth was he should never have told her about Annabelle. There was no reason for her to know and now that she did, he would always wonder if she pitied him.

The hawk touched the ground gently, with hardly a bump, but Hadley grimaced as though she'd just been through a jostling. He smiled openly. For someone so brave, the woman had some hang-ups that just couldn't be ignored.

She glared at him. "Don't laugh at me, Hawk. I'm sure there is something in this world or another that you're afraid of. If I happen to still be living and I have the good luck to witness your terror, I can assure you, I will not make fun of you."

He cleared his throat. There was no point in playing tit-for-tat with her right now. It hadn't even been a full hour since he'd unleashed his nasty temper on her and been deliberately awful. She could still take shots at him if she wanted to.

"So, this is my ancestral home."

"It's beautiful, like a stone cottage in New England only twice as big."

It was a good description, very apt, and he was surprised it had never occurred to him to make that comparison the entire time he'd lived in her dimension.

"My family has been in the Warrior class for eight generations. That means we train to be and then eventually become protectors of the Royal Family."

She nodded, stepping down from the bird's claw and ignoring the hand he offered her. "I gathered that much. You were, after all, sent with Zamara on her dimensional trip gone bad. All the men call you their Prince but you don't associate yourself with the royals so I assumed that meant you were the head of whatever clan or group you all belong to."

He needed to remember how smart and intuitive she was. Hadley was not a woman who needed things explained to her. Annabelle had been sweet and funny but if he'd ever attempted to explain all of the intricate details of this, the poor dear's head might have exploded.

Shaking his head, he felt awful for having thought that. What kind of person remembered the woman they had loved as anything but the perfect being they were?

Hadley walked towards his house, her arms crossed in front of her chest. He couldn't help but admire the tight, snug cling of her pajama pants on her rear end. Swallowing, he tried to ignore the tug on his groin. There were other things to focus on, like getting the girl some clothes, since she still wore the sleeping attire she'd been in when they kidnapped her.

Hawk turned around and petted the bird that had flown them here. The screech in its throat was the entire acknowledgement he got before it took off, practically shooting from the ground as it regained the sky. The other birds that had brought the warriors took off after it in a single file line.

He missed the bird dance his previous flock would have engaged in. But he hadn't earned adoration from this group. In fact, they were lucky they had come to pick them up at all. He sighed.

"My prince." Stone's voice garnered his attention.

Hawk realized what a terrible host he was. "You have been to my home before, yes?"

Stone motioned his head in the direction of the house and Hawk followed his gaze. Hadley stood at the doorway speaking with an elderly woman. Walking forward, Hawk focused his attention on the woman in the doorway. Who was that? Had his family hired new help? It wouldn't surprise him but it still seemed strange. His father had employed the same people for a thousand years. Feeling suddenly like he needed to run, he picked up his pace. When he reached the front door, his heart pounded.

"Hawk, your mother was just welcoming us." Hadley's smile seemed genuine as she turned her attention from the older woman to him.

"Please call me Leopard, my dear." His mother turned her attention from Hadley to look at him. "Welcome home, my son."

The woman's voice shook and Hawk narrowed his eyes. He couldn't utter a word. Certainly, she resembled his mother. But this woman who was far too old to be his mother. There should have another thousand years before she looked like this. Had she gotten ill?

"Mother." It seemed an inane thing to say but under the circumstances, he wasn't sure what else could be said. Hadley sucked in her breath. This was obviously not the reaction she would have expected after his long absence.

The woman who had given birth to him reached out and touched his arm. "I can only imagine your questions." She raised her voice so all of his men could hear her. "Come inside all of you."

The smell of cooked pheasant wafted through the air and Hawk took a deep breath. There was no doubt he was home in his mother's kitchen. He could almost imagine her saying the prayer of thanks to the animals for the bounty. He'd watched her do it a thousand times as a child but he'd all but forgotten it in two hundred years.

Hawk stood dumbfounded as his mother meticulously laid out the dining room table for company. He had so many questions, but he couldn't bring himself to ask. How did you inquire of the woman who bore you why she had suddenly gotten so old?

When the plates were served and everyone was seated, his mother reached out and grabbed his arm.

"I am not as you expected me."

Hawk shook his head. "Mother, I did not think you would have aged this much in such a short period of time."

Hadley laughed. "I have a hard time coming to terms with the fact that to all of you the time you spent on earth was a short period of time."

"What should have been a short jaunt became well longer than expected. Everyone thought you'd be back in less than a hundred years," his mother uttered solemnly.

"As we would have, Mother, had things gone as they should. I advised the Princess not to go to that cursed blue planet." Hawk couldn't hide the contempt in his voice or miss the flare in Hadley's eyes when he said it.

"The seers have watched you for some time. We've all hoped and prayed for your

return.”

He narrowed his eyes. “I took an oath to protect the Princess. It eats at me every second I am here that she is still there.”

His mother nodded, tears in her eyes. “I know my son. I’ve always understood what happened, as did the Royals. But, I’m afraid Zamara’s exit did more than break our hearts figuratively.”

“Please, Madame Leopard, won’t you explain more?” Stone sat at the edge of his seat. “Please forgive me, but it is not just your appearance that has struck us as odd. The roads, this entire place seems to be in disarray.”

“It is.” She sighed. “And you haven’t even gotten to Astor yet.”

“Why did Zamara’s leaving do this?” Hawk could feel his pulse pounding in every part of his body. Now he wasn’t just responsible for Zamara’s captivity and forced breeding but for the destruction of his entire world.

“It seems, and we were all completely unaware of this before, that in order for the metaphysical strength to continue on Haven there needs to be a balance within the Royal Family. You will recall that Zamara’s aunt, the Princess Ledroina moved on to the next plane of existence right before you left. Zamara held the same power as she did—the healing, life-sustaining abilities that kept this place thriving and our people young and thriving for many generations.”

Hadley tapped her finger on the table on what Hawk thought must be an unconscious gesture. “So when my mother left, things started to age more quickly, to fall apart?”

His mother nodded. “Absolutely correct. It hit the older generation first, they are almost all gone, and now my generation is affected. All of the younger people—your contemporaries and younger—have been sent to Astor for testing and evaluation to see if anyone holds enough of that ability to perhaps save us.”

“So that is where Rabbit and Dragon are.” Hawk looked at his hands. He’d been in such a state of anxiety he hadn’t even asked about his older brother and younger sister.

“That’s right darling.” His mother coughed violently and held a napkin against her mouth.

“And Dad?”

“We lost him six months ago.” Unshed tears glistened in her eyes but did not fall. Hawk was not surprised. Women like his mother, the kind who could be married to a Warrior, and raise a Warrior man, did not cry even over the death of their beloveds. That was something he’d appreciated about women from Earth: if they loved someone and that person died, it was considered perfectly appropriate for them to express their grief in a physical manner.

If his mother had been the center of his life at home, impressing their father had been the focus of his existence outside of the house. His father had once fought, nearly to the death, to protect the king from an attack by a would-be conqueror from the Tribunal Dimension. He had wanted nothing more than to honor his family in the same way. Hawk’s first trip out of his own dimension and things had gone so terribly awry that not only had he failed the Princess, his father was now dead. Grief and self-loathing threatened to overwhelm him.

Hawk closed his eyes.

Hadley gently touched his arm. “There was no way you could have known, Hawk. You were doing everything you could to protect Zamara until there was simply nothing

else to do. Like everyone has been telling me, two hundred years is not that long of a stretch here.” Hadley’s voice sounded so sincere. He opened his eyes to see her staring intently at him. Ridiculously, her belief in him made him feel slightly better. “Am I wrong or have you never faced this problem before because you always had more than one person in the Royal Family with the particular ability, right? There was always at least one person present who had whatever it was everyone needed.”

His mother nodded her assent to Hadley’s question and he smiled at how well they already got along. He knew he’d have to face the music with the Royals in the morning at Astor, but for now it was good to be home and it was exceptional to have Hadley believe in him, especially because he had yet to do anything to earn her trust.

“There’s more.” His mother sighed and her crinkled face looked so worn and distraught that he wanted to scream at the unfairness of it all.

“What’s that?”

He looked at his men. They sat stoically in silence, each absorbing every blow as he expected they would. Somewhere over the last two centuries they had all become accepting of bad news, as it was the norm. Optimism was no longer a word in their vocabulary.

“The Great Ones have stopped speaking to the Royals. They’ve abandoned Haven.”

Hawk sucked in his breath. This was dire news. In all the history of Haven, the Great Ones had never vanished. They had been a constant comfort to the Royal Family, Astor, and all of Haven. It had distressed him to no end to see them hunted and pursued on earth.

“Who are the Great Ones?” Hadley’s eyes were wide.

“They’re the animals of the Royal Family. Well, not really. No one calls them their own animal. There’s never been anyone born who could command them but they’ve always spoken to the royal family, advised them, and helped. With every dimension we visited, their elusiveness was the same. It’s really amazing, actually. Nowhere had anyone ever really seen one and certainly we never found them in any aquariums or cages.” He hadn’t given it much thought before, there had been no time but now it seemed so clear. “Some animals are missing from certain dimensions. The first time I saw an elephant on Earth I stood like an idiot with my mouth open. We don’t have them in Haven, but the Great Ones are everywhere and nowhere have they been captured alive.”

“I know what you’re talking about, Hawk.” Hadley’s pupils were big. She closed her mouth and he realized he’d never seen someone sit so perfectly still and yet seem so completely unglued before.

“You searched for them yourself, Hadley. They eluded you.”

She paused for a moment and when she spoke, her voice sounded rough. “Sort of.”

This was going to be one of those situations where he had no idea the direction of her thoughts. “What do you mean?”

“Before I got here, before you explained to me about my mother’s heritage and brought me here, I thought they were just dreams.” She audibly swallowed. “But when we were dimension-hopping and I was so afraid that I was going to die because there was so much pain, I heard it when I was awake too.”

Hawk’s heart pounded. He had no idea what she was about to say but it was one of those moments in life where he was certain something of significance was about to

happen. “Heard what, darling?”

His mother turned her head sharply to look at him and he had no idea why, but he only wanted to look at Hadley. It was as if he’d suddenly developed tunnel vision and his whole world revolved around her.

“The giant squid, Hawk. I’ve dreamt of them for years. Only recently, they’ve started speaking to me. It was part of my drive to find them; it has felt like a compulsion since I was a child. But I heard her voice during our descent to Haven and she knew you too. She told me you wouldn’t hurt me.”

“Oh Hawk,” his mother’s voice filled with emotion. “You brought us back salvation. They speak to *her*.”

Hadley gripped the table in front of her and he reached out and grabbed her hand. Her eyes looked panicked. “I’m not anyone’s salvation. It’s not like we’ve ever had a face-to-face conversation.”

He shrugged his shoulder, pretending a calm for Hadley’s sake that he did not feel. “How could you, on Earth? Don’t worry. When we get to Astor the Great Ones there will either greet you or they won’t. You did your part of this deal when you opened the portal. Now we just need to get you healthy.”

But Hawk didn’t believe his own words and the crocodile’s greeting by the lake when they arrived made more sense. The seers had seen Hadley coming; they knew what her arrival meant. It was more than likely that Hadley’s arrival signified the end of this dark time. That meant whether she liked it or not, the Royals were going to have expectations of her.

Silently, he made the first vow he’d made since swearing to protect Zamara. He would not fail Hadley. Whatever happened, she would not be hurt or distressed in anyway. All of Haven could be damned.

As he stared across the table into her green mist-filled eyes, he wondered if somehow she had heard his silent oath. He hoped somehow she had.

Chapter Nine

Hadley lay in the darkness of the guest room she'd been given and tried to make her head stop pounding. She had no idea if they even got headaches on Haven or if it was just what Hawk would think of as her 'weak human side' that caused the pounding in her temples. So rather than ask for a pain reliever, she opted to suffer in silence.

Besides, it wasn't as though she could take a pill that could make her thoughts calm down. Why had she told them she spoke to the giant squid? Maybe she really was just deluding herself or perhaps it had been a one-time thing. She was sure she was no one's savior.

She rolled over onto her stomach and pushed her head down on the pillow. For a moment, she tried counting backwards in her mind to see if she could distract herself, but that only managed to make her frustrated, which left her with no choice but to roll over again.

Unsure of who had the room next to hers, she attempted to ignore the loud snores that sounded through the wall. She felt badly for whatever woman had to share a room with whoever was in there. If there was one thing she couldn't stand, it was loud snoring that kept her up all night. Her father snored. The few times they'd gone on vacations as a family, well what constituted as family for her father, which usually meant he joined Hadley, her sister, and the nanny after a few days, she'd hated staying in adjoining rooms because she knew every night she'd be in agony, waiting for daylight.

Groaning, she covered her eyes with her hands as if she could make the already pitch-black room even darker. She heard the door creak open, and she darted up in bed and clutched the pillow to her chest.

"Who's there?" Her voice shook.

"It's Hawk, darling. Don't be afraid."

How had he known she was terrified and why was he in her room? "What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to check on you, make sure you're okay. I just had this feeling you were in discomfort."

If she'd been back at home she would have called him a liar, but who knew how they did things in Haven. Maybe they could sense the pain of everyone in the house. "I'm sorry if my headache disturbed your sleep."

Hawk approached the bed and sat down next to her. He placed his hand on her head and she tried not to sigh with the pleasure his cool hand gave to her hot skin. "You're burning up."

"I don't feel hot. My head is just pounding and whoever is in the next room is snoring so loud I could throw something."

"Ha." Hawk actually snickered. "Poor Stone. Did he just lose your heart?"

Hadley sighed. If Hawk was going to give her a hard time, he could get out. "For the thousandth time today, Stone never had my heart."

"I'm teasing you, but I know your head hurts, sorry." He picked her up in his arms and she groaned. "It's quieter in my room and I can take care of you there."

"I didn't ask you to take care of me." Why was she being obstinate? Oh that's

right—because she was just a means to an end for him and she'd be damned if she also became a burden. "Put me down and I'll take care of myself. I've been doing it since I was fourteen years old."

That was the year she and Hailey had woken up on the morning of their birthday to find their nanny dismissed, their bags packed, and after they blew out the candles on their birthday cake they'd been deposited on a train to an all girls' school in Connecticut.

Hawk crossed the room with her in his arms as if she weighed nothing. She might have fought him if she had even the slightest amount of energy left but rather than getting better, she seemed to be getting worse. Finally giving up, she relaxed in his arms, remembering how good it had felt to be in his embrace when they'd traveled through the portal.

It was cooler in the hallway and a small light burned at the end by the staircase. The shadows on the wall were long and thick, looking like they might come alive. She laughed, which then became a groan. "I think I must be losing my mind, Hawk. I'm having delusional thoughts. Is that one of the first signs that the poison is working? Headache and fever followed by delusions?"

"Annabelle started with fever and vomiting. Bethany had a seizure. Clarice fainted and never woke up. I didn't stick around to watch Deirdre die. But it seems like everyone was unique in how they lost their lives."

Hadley shook her head. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have asked you to remember."

"I told you that you were going to die, which gives you the right to ask me about it."

She pushed her head up against his chest and listened to the strong beat of his heart. Her sister had been a lucky woman. Even though she'd died way too young, the little time she'd gotten to spend on Earth, she'd been with Hawk. He hadn't just considered her to be a waste of time, but rather something to be treasured.

"What were your delusional thoughts?"

She sighed. "It looks like the shadows on the wall are alive."

Hawk opened the door to what she assumed was his room and walked inside. It was cooler in his room than it had been in hers, but not as chilly as the hall had been. He laid her down on the bed and pulled off her pants.

She opened her eyes. "What do you think you're doing?"

"You have been wearing the same dirty pajamas for over a day now. They stink. But in addition to that, I'm trying to get you cooled off."

His argument had some logic, and she was too uncomfortable to care that he was about to see her naked. Except, in some deep crevice of her mind, she acknowledged that she would officially have no secrets from him when this was over. She would probably be a pale comparison to Annabelle, and he'd once again congratulate himself on not being involved with a Pettigrew. A completely unattractive Pettigrew.

Her thoughts started to drift and she hoped that in moments she'd be asleep so whatever new humiliations she was about to endure she could be unaware of. Even though it made no sense, with her eyes closed she could see the shadows more clearly. They were alive and they were everywhere. But now she could see they weren't just shadows, they held shapes. Men and women swirled around the room approaching her; soon they'd be so close, and they might eat her up. She couldn't let that happen. Her eyes flew open.

"Hawk." She shouted as her head turned from side to side.

A damp rag pressed against her forehead. "I'm bringing down your fever, Hadley. What you smell is herbs and holistic medicine my mother keeps around the house."

"They're coming for me, Hawk. They want me with them."

"You're not making any sense Hadley. It's the fever."

She shook her head. "No, the shadows are coming, Hawk. Please believe me."

"We'll talk about it in the morning."

She thought she felt him lean over and kiss her gently on the cheek. "You're cooling off, darling. Try to go back to sleep."

"Why do you call me that?"

"What?"

"Darling."

He stroked her hair out of her eyes. "Sleep."

Her eyes felt heavy, and against her will they closed again. She braced herself for the shadows, but instead she was once again in the Mote museum staring at the tank that held the Giant Squid. She walked to the cool glass and pressed her hands against it.

We told you we knew he wouldn't hurt you.

"I guess it depends on your definition of hurt. I'm afraid I had developed a little crush on Hawky-boy and he quickly rid me of that. But I believe I'll be fine."

So you think you're over your feelings for Hawk? That's why you're curled up in a bed with him letting him take care of you while you're sick?

Hadley wasn't going to even answer that question. For her own sanity, it was better she continued to pretend she didn't care for Hawk. She cleared her throat. "They call you the Great Ones. You've stopped speaking to them in Astor."

The squid twirled around in its cage. *We have been prevented from communicating, but now you have come and we like talking to you.*

Hadley pressed her head up against the glass. "I like talking to you too, so will you speak to me when I get to Astor or will I come across like a crazy person?"

We will always answer you, Hadley Pettigrew, daughter of Zamara, Princess of Haven and Heart of the Sea. Watch out for the shadows. They are everywhere.

Hadley's eyes felt heavy as she struggled to open them. Hawk lay next to her on the bed, one arm draped over her body with his hand pressed up against her cheek. Well, at least *he* didn't snore. When she'd been a child and sick, she'd desperately wished for someone to hold her like this. An incredible sadness filled Hadley and she didn't try to stop the tears that welled up in her eyes. Not only did this illness signify the beginning of her death, but the person who held her as if she was cherished didn't actually have those feelings for her.

Hawk's thumb brushed over her eye as another tear fell. His eyes flew open.

"Hadley, are you still feeling sick?" He sat up, his voice rough like sandpaper.

"No, thank you, I'm much cooler."

She rolled over, suddenly embarrassed by letting her emotions show. Looking down at herself, she realized she was covered by only a sheet and completely naked otherwise. A flood of embarrassment filled her as she remembered how little she'd protested his taking off her clothes. The sainted Annabelle would have probably put up more of a fight. She knew that was an unfair thought and she didn't care.

"Scared me last night. You got so hot and incredibly pale." He pushed his hand against her forehead and pulled her back against his chest. "I was worried you weren't

coming back.”

His hand absently stroked her hair as he spooned behind her. She closed her eyes again. Maybe she shouldn't care that it wasn't real or that he thought of Annabelle. She might be dead any day. Any affection was better than none, wasn't it?

She sniffed. “It wouldn't be your fault. You didn't inject me with the poison. At least I wouldn't have died all by myself, which probably would have been the case back at home. I guess that still might be the case when we get to Astor.” She swallowed but her throat still felt dry. A thought suddenly occurred to her and she felt ashamed. “Hawk, I'm sorry about your father.”

“Thank you, Hadley.” She swore she could hear the sadness of the universe in his tone. “I won't let you die alone.”

At least he hadn't made promises he couldn't keep. No heroic declarations that he would see to it that she didn't die at all. That would be, of course, impossible. She sighed. “Thank you.”

A high-pitched feminine scream filled the air and Hawk detached himself from her and leapt out of bed. “Mother?”

He ran out into the hall wearing only his boxer shorts and giving her a view of his back that, like his arms, was covered in tattoos. Without her glasses, she couldn't make out what the markings were. Hopefully, Hawk had thought to take them when he'd come into her room last night.

Hadley reached over to the side of the bed and was relieved to find her glasses. She pushed the frames up onto her face and the room seemed so much brighter and more in focus. Doors opened and slammed closed in the hall as all of the Warriors responded to the scream. Hawk's mother seemed like such a nice woman, she wanted to see if she could help.

Standing up, her knees almost buckled but she caught herself on the edge of the bed. So last night's episode had clearly knocked some of her strength out of her. Stumbling around, she found her way to Hawk's closet where she grabbed what she hoped was an unimportant t-shirt he wouldn't mind her temporarily stealing. It covered her completely, almost past her knees, and even though she still felt shaky, she walked slowly out of the door of Hawk's room.

“I just don't see how this could have happened overnight.” Hawk shouted, but he didn't sound alarmed or angry, but rather just that he was trying to be heard over the hubbub happening around him

She followed the sound of his voice until she was in the kitchen. Hawk and his men surrounded a woman Hadley had never seen before. The woman was simply stunning. Long black hair that looked more like fine spun silk fell down her back. Her skin was pale, smooth, and unblemished. Her blue eyes gleamed with life and laughter. Who was she and why did Hawk grip her shoulders?

Hadley cleared her throat. She really needed a glass of water.

The woman spun around. “Hadley,” the joy exploded from that one word and Hadley found herself in the other woman's embrace.

“I'm sorry.” Hadley sputtered. “But do we know each other?”

“Oh.” A tear slipped from the dark woman's eye. “You don't recognize me. I'm Leopard, Hawk's mother.”

Hadley gasped and pulled back to look at her. Dear heavens, now she could see the

resemblance. Hawk looked a great deal like his mother. Same dark hair and high cheekbones that were evident on his face were now on hers. But how was this possible? The woman had regained at least forty years overnight.

“What’s happened?”

“We don’t know, but I woke up like this and it’s not just me. This entire place, everything looks so new. The roads are fixed, the trees are blooming, and I can’t remember when last we had such a sunny day.”

Hadley wasn’t sure what to say. All of her training in manners failed her. What should a person say in such a circumstance? “That’s wonderful. I’m so thrilled for you, however it happened.” Dizziness hit her like a sledgehammer and threatened to take her down to the floor.

“Hadley.” Hawk grabbed her from his mother’s arms. “You shouldn’t be up yet.” He picked her up like she was a baby and she cringed. This had to stop happening. It wasn’t okay to go through life being carried around like you couldn’t walk. “We almost lost her last night. She had a terrible headache, high fever, and some sort of delusions.”

Leopard gasped. “Why didn’t you wake me?”

“I knew what to do. I’m putting her back in bed.”

Hadley shook her head. “I don’t want to go back to bed.”

“Wait a minute, Hawk.” Stone’s voice filled the room. “I think Hadley is a healer. The lack of her mother’s presence nearly destroyed our whole world, so wouldn’t it make sense that, given the same abilities, Hadley is now setting things right? Maybe she is the reason things are looking new again. I bet if we retraced our steps from yesterday all of it will look better since she’s been there.”

Oh hell, more damned savior stuff. As soon as the room stopped spinning, she would put a stop to all of this once and for all.

“She’s only half her mother’s daughter. The other half is human. Last night she almost died. I can’t let her do this for the whole world. It would kill her in minutes.”

Leopard placed her hand on Hadley’s arm. “She feels cool, that is good. She just looks pale and worn out. Put her in bed, Hawk.” Hadley tried not to watch the revolving patterns on the floor and the wall as they walked to his room. Instead, she listened to the last thing Leopard said and grimaced at the thought.

“If Hadley didn’t know she did that last night, then I don’t see how we can possibly prevent it from happening again.”

So now she was doubly in trouble. If the poison didn’t kill her, this newfound ability obviously would.

Chapter Ten

Hawk smoothed the hair on her forehead. He would never let her cut her hair. It might be ridiculous, but the night before when he'd held her close to him and done everything he could to bring down her temperature, praying to any deity that would listen to not let her die, he'd taken possession of her. At least in his mind. He realized it might take a while to convince Hadley of his ownership, considering how he'd treated her the day before.

Damn his temper. It got him into more trouble. His mother had once told him he didn't have any filter when he got really angry between what he thought and what he said. For some reason, Hadley flustered him, and when he felt befuddled he behaved badly. It was childish. He suspected Hadley was just the sort of woman to help work on this particular issue, especially because she hadn't backed down or lost herself in hysterics.

But for now they had bigger problems. If Hadley was going to heal the problems of everyone and anything she came into contact with, then she would be kept right where she was until he could figure out how she could do it safely. He'd brought her here to be fixed, well, it had been one of the reasons, and he'd be damned if there was something else threatening her life.

"Why am I dizzy?" She closed her eyes and moaned like she couldn't stand to have them open.

"I have no idea. I've never seen anything like this happen before, but I think I might know someone who can help you."

He hated to ask the arrogant prick for help, even if he was his own brother. Dragon was the man for the job. Just because their parents were from Warrior families did not mean they gave birth to Warrior children—a fact that had driven his father to distraction. His sister was a seer and his brother a Mystic. The Royals used the Mystics to enhance their abilities, to teach them how to handle the gifts they were born with. Hadley needed Dragon and it would be Hawk who would have to pay for it, maybe in blood.

"Hadley, stay here. Don't try to get up, just relax, if you can, and I'll be back. I have to make the equivalent of a phone call."

One eye opened, showing him the beauty of her green depths. The mysteries hidden in her eyes had been haunting him since he'd first kidnapped her on earth. "Who are you going to call?"

He sighed. "My brother."

"The dragon."

"He's not a dragon, that's just his name."

She nodded and grabbed her head. His heart fell into his stomach. This had to stop. She was killing herself with no hope of controlling it to fix gods-knew-what in Haven. He was grateful to have his mother back in her prime condition but he guessed even Leopard wouldn't want her to die to make things better.

Hawk walked with determination out of his room and through his home. There was no way Dragon would make this easy on him, he'd probably refuse about a hundred times before he agreed, but ultimately his brother could be relied on to do what was right.

In better days, and with less dire circumstances, he would simply send a message to Astor and wait for his brother to reply. They'd go back and forth debating logistics until Dragon caved and came back, if for no other reason than to see why Hawk pestered him so badly. But today required face-to-face contact.

Knocking loudly on his parent's door, he didn't anticipate a response and was not surprised to hear none. His mother would be out surveying how much had improved overnight. He twisted the door handle and the door slammed open, hitting the wall behind it with a loud thud, shaking several framed pictures on the wall. A grown man, he still found entering his parents' domain odd. His father had been big on personal space and privacy and the children were rarely invited into their parents' bedroom.

He waited a beat to see if the pictures were okay and straightened the one in the middle. It was a large framed shot of his family during simpler times. Hawk couldn't have been more than one hundred years old, his hair short and shaved closely to his head; he'd just completed his first round of Warrior training. He wore all black, the traditional garb of the newly installed warrior, and he held a satisfied, smug look in his eyes as if he could take on the world. Hawk snorted. If he could go back and talk to that clueless young man, he'd tell him not to be so cocky.

Dragon, who never smiled, exhibited a half-smirk, the closest he ever got to the real thing, and Hawk couldn't be sure, but he thought he remembered his mother cracking a joke right before the picture was taken, the cause of their grins. His older brother's eyes already held wariness inappropriate for a person so young. With all of his magical ability, had Dragon seen what was to come when no one else had?

Rabbit, barely grown up, showed signs of the great beauty he was often told she was. It was hard for him as her brother to recognize his sister in that fashion. She, like her brothers, had their mother's black hair but her eyes, unique for their family, were lilac like the flowers his mother attempted to grow every year in her honor. They were the sign of a seer, every child on Haven gifted with them grew up with the talent to see both what would come in their home dimension but also sometimes in others. Had it been Rabbit who had seen what befallen them on Earth? If he ever got to see her again he would ask.

Their father stood behind them all, no joy on his face but that didn't surprise Hawk. Had he ever seen his father show affection? He wasn't sure and he wasn't convinced his mother would have cared either way. The wives of the Warriors knew the kind of men they married. They were hard men. The patriarch of their family stared at him now with cold brown eyes accusing him, challenging him, and ultimately condemning him for what happened.

Hawk shook his head. No more, it was time to put a plan into motion that would finally end what had begun.

Striding further into the room, he approached his task cautiously. The communicator was to be used sparingly, if at all. When he'd left two centuries earlier, they still hadn't been sure as to the technicalities as to why this worked in the first place. It had always bothered Hawk. Why were they using something if they didn't understand it? Who else could be monitoring their conversations?

Attacks on their realm were so rare and far between, Hawk feared they had become too complacent about things. Like, for example, the likelihood that a Royal Princess could be all but abducted and drugged into submission to breed children for an earthman.

On his father's dresser, as if the man still lived and was likely to come through the

door any minute, sat the portal bowl. Next to it sat a ceramic pitcher of seawater from the natural border of the capital city of Astor. All people of Haven had the same pouring device and bowl. Hawk wasn't sure if it was the water that made this possible, the special container, or a combination of both, but in any case he was glad to have it available to him now.

He poured the water into the bowl and waited a moment before he closed his eyes and pictured his brother. Communication was easiest if you knew the person you wished to speak to but in extreme situations, location could work as well. "Send me to Dragon."

The air in the room thickened, taking on the density of fog and his skin tingled as if tiny beads of electricity jolted him. Above the bowl a screen appeared, his brother's face appeared in it. Dragon stared blankly at Hawk and it took Hawk a moment to realize he'd woken him up. It wasn't like his older brother to sleep in, or at least it hadn't been before Hawk left.

Dragon cleared his throat. "So it's true then, you have returned."

Hawk nodded and tried to speak, but his voice failed him. Dragon had their father's eyes, not just in color but in attitude as well.

"You must have some need of me or you wouldn't be calling. I certainly don't expect to be invited to some sort of 'congratulations on your return' party."

He wasn't going to get into a pissing contest, at least not yet. "How are you, Dragon?"

"Ha. Pleasantries? Okay, why not? I am fine, Hawk, how are you?"

"I am, I suppose, well enough. I hope I'm not waking you."

Dragon narrowed his eyes. "It was a late night. The King has had all the Mystics and seers working overtime trying to predict what will happen when this Halfling you've brought back with you from Earth arrives in Astor. She's an unknown factor. Almost no one is getting readings."

Hawk raised one eyebrow. "Almost no one?"

"Our sister picks up on her quite nicely. She was how we knew you were back."

Hawk nodded, Well, Dragon had answered that question for him.

"And you?"

"I see things in relation to Zamara's daughter but a lot of it is very vague."

It was really important that Hawk handled the part of this discussion perfectly or Dragon would deny him just to watch him fail. "Have you seen anything in relation to yourself?"

Dragon stood up and the picture of his face moved with him. "Why would there be any connection between myself and Hadley Pettigrew other than the fact that you brought her back and are evidently hoarding her at our ancestral home instead of bringing her here?"

If it had been anyone else but his brother Hawk might have considered explaining what was going on, but instead he thought he'd leave Dragon to stew on that for a while. "So not a hint about how you might be involved in helping to end this entire problem, then? Okay, sorry to bother you."

Hawk poured the water out of the bowl, ending their conversation abruptly. He smirked and walked past his parents' bed, which was in the direction of the room exit. As he could have predicted, a screen appeared in front of him.

"Hawk." His name alone held so much venom, Hawk was sure if his brother could

have reached through the screen and punched him hard in the nose he would have. Actually, he wasn't entirely certain his brother wasn't powerful enough to do just that.

"Yes, Dragon?" He'd play innocent; it was still the best shot at getting what he wanted.

"How could I possibly be involved in ending this entire problem?"

"It seems that darling Hadley," he thought he saw Dragon raise his eyebrows and he wasn't sure why. "has the abilities of her mother tenfold. Everywhere she goes, everyone she comes near, is being healed by her presence."

"That is wonderful news, Hawk. Perhaps if you had gotten her here earlier much could have been avoided."

Hawk bit down on his tongue. He wanted to tell Dragon where he could take his presumptions and attitude but he needed to stay focused on the goal. Hadley was his first priority, he'd sworn it last night, this morning, and every pore in his body stood at alert demanding he take care of what happened to her.

"The problem is that the task is killing her because she has no control over it and no idea how it is happening to her."

Dragon sighed and Hawk could see him sit down on his bed through the portal screen. "She hasn't been trained. There is so much need, it's overwhelming her."

Hawk kept his voice cool and even. "That is what we assumed and since she's here in our families' home, I thought perhaps it was a sign that you were supposed to be the one to help her. But as you said, you've had no visions of that."

"It is, perhaps, a result of the fact that I've never been able to have visions of my own future."

"I didn't realize that was a problem for you, brother." Damn, why had he said that?

"Not all of us are gifted with destinies that are so clear from day one."

Dragon's inability to be a Warrior had caused a rift between them years earlier and it seemed that chasm would never heal. Hawk had long since stopped looking for anything from Dragon except barely veiled sarcasm.

Enough. "So will you be coming or should I look for help elsewhere?"

He'd put it out there, given Dragon ample opportunity to take shots at him, and now it really came to do this moment. Either Dragon wanted to leave Astor and come home to help Hadley or he didn't. Just because he was the best person for the job didn't mean anything when it came to their animosity towards each other and, since it was Hawk asking for the help, there really was no telling what Dragon would do.

"There is no one who could assist her better than me."

Hawk nodded. "I am aware of that."

"And you could have had Mom ask me or anyone else, but you asked me yourself."

"That is also true."

"Big mistake, Hawk. I would watch the whole world explode before I would offer you one bit of assistance."

Chapter Eleven

Hadley awoke to Hawk's gentle ministrations. He rubbed her cheeks with a cloth that smelled of aloe and another scent she couldn't identify. It was too bad she was going to die from this craziness; she would have liked to have learned all about the plants and animals that were indigenous to Haven.

As she watched the fine lines of concern and concentration crossing his face, she couldn't help but realize there were many things she would have liked to know in this place that she never imagined existed.

She reached out and grabbed his arm. Her dizziness had passed, she didn't need him to baby her, and it was quasi-pathetic that she enjoyed it.

"Feeling better?" His voice was low, hushed and as she looked out the window, she saw the dim light of the sunset in the horizon. Dear god, she had slept the whole day away. She tried to sit up; annoyed that he restrained her from doing so.

She nodded. "Yes, just a little upset I apparently wasted an entire day asleep."

He shrugged. "You were sick, you needed the rest."

"Why won't you let me move?"

"I don't want you to get dizzy again. If you must sit, let me help you." He reached behind her back and helped her, propping her against the cushions of the bed.

Who was this Hawk? The man who'd tended her last night was so different from the one who had told her she was a means to an end. Even the thought of that terrible remark made her bristle with anger. "You have to stop helping me, Hawk. People might actually think we were friends. Don't you have a job to do? My mother is still in earth potentially getting ready to be impregnated again, right?"

"I will not leave your mother there to languish but neither did I bring you here to watch you die."

When she could finally speak through the utter confusion that clogged her throat, she could barely vocalize the words. "I thought I was just a means to an end to you."

His eyes were soft, gentle. He placed his hands behind his neck and sat back in his chair. "If I live a million years, Hadley, I'll wish I hadn't said that to you."

She sighed. He looked so sincere; she had a hard time continuing to be angry. "If I live a million years, I'll wish you hadn't meant it."

He leaned forward, his hands gripping the side of the bed. He stared into her eyes and she decided she'd been wrong all along. His eyes weren't the sea, they weren't the stars, they were the color of the moss that grew on the outside of his family's stone cottage. He was as natural here as the very plants that fed off of the soil.

"Here's the thing, darling, I don't think I did."

He pushed the chair backwards when he stood up and it toppled over into the side of the room. She swallowed. Whenever Hawk showed strong emotions, he frightened her and, she hated to admit, turned her on at the same time.

"What does that mean?" Maybe what she should have said earlier was that if she lived a million years she'd never understand why men did what they did and said what they said.

"It means I wanted to mean it, I thought if I said it I would have to mean it, because

to not mean it, to allow myself to feel what I feel for you and think what I think of you, seems like the worst kind of betrayal I could imagine.”

Hadley looked down at herself. She still wore only his long shirt and she hadn’t showered. Not exactly in the physical state of beauty she would have preferred to have this type of conversation. She rolled her eyes, whom was she kidding? She’d never be that good looking.

“A betrayal of Annabelle.” For her it wasn’t a question, the love of his life had died and the woman also happened to be her sister. She could see how he would think his feelings for her, Hadley, were a betrayal.

“Of her, yes. Of my men. Of our cause. Of everything.”

She nodded.

“Why don’t you just take me to Astor and leave me there? I’ll be out of your way, we won’t have to see each other anymore, and whatever this is between us will end when we are out of each other’s sight.”

He slammed his fist against the wall. “No.”

“Why not?”

In lieu of an answer, he stormed across the room, sat on the bed next to her, and claimed her mouth with his own. For a second, she was so stunned she did nothing but sit there straight-faced and unmoving, but within seconds his tongue had skillfully forced its way into her mouth and she was lost in the sensation that was Hawk.

His skin was rough, he hadn’t shaved, and his long black hair fell over her as they embraced. The feel of it, comparable to silk, sent shivers down her back and made her moan.

He pulled her closer until she was supported entirely by his weight. She wrapped her arms around his neck and met his tongue thrust for thrust, wishing it were another part of his anatomy plunging in and out of her. His hands fisted in her hair as he pushed them both onto the bed. He pulled the covers down her body to expose her legs.

His right hand left her hair to stroke her leg. She shivered and he pulled his mouth from hers. They both panted heavily.

He grinned. “You’re wearing my Druggy tee-shirt.”

She shook her head. “Who is Druggy?” Closing her eyes, she let the sensations of the moment fill her.

“Not a who, a what. It’s a game children play, similar to soccer. I’ll teach it to you. But not now.”

He kissed her again hard and she sighed. She could get used to this. Her eyes flew open and she pushed at his shoulders. That last thought scared the hell out of her. Managing to pull her lips from his, she scooted backwards even with him on top of her.

“Stop, we can’t do this.”

His eyes, glazed over, looked confused. “What’s the matter?” He rubbed a hand through her hair and she almost relented.

“This is wrong. Completely wrong.”

He took a deep breath and she noticed that his hands shook. Hell, she couldn’t remember if she’d ever had a man so turned on before that he shook. Pulling himself into a sitting position, he scooted off the bed. She had to give Hawk credit—he had self-control. Clearing his throat, he smiled weakly.

“Why is it wrong, darling?”

“Because five minutes ago you told me all of this went against your memory of Annabelle, your duty, and your promises to your men. I can’t just jump into bed with you knowing it comes with all of that baggage.”

He put his right hand on his forehead. “Some day, I’ll have to learn to not say everything I think and feel to you.”

Hadley sat up even further straightening her back. She narrowed her eyes. “See, there you go again. You’re pissed so you get cruel. Just another reason I’m not sleeping with you.”

She crossed her arms over her chest and hoped she looked determined and not at all like she was going to cry. He shook his head.

“I’m going for a walk.” He pulled the door shut behind him with surprising restraint.

Hadley sank into the cushions. Was she the most stupid woman she’d ever met? How long had she lusted over Hawk, and now that he wanted her she complained because he had reservations?

She jumped out of bed and rushed towards the door. Pulling it open, the hallway was still and cold. Swallowing, she suddenly remembered the shadows from the night before. Had that really just been delusions brought on by whatever happened to her?

Taking a guess that he would exit the cottage through the kitchen, she turned right to go out the door. Once again, she wished she had clothes, and not the meager t-shirt she’d been in since the morning and she desperately needed a shower.

But she couldn’t leave things with Hawk like that. She felt like the worst kind of shrew.

“He didn’t come this way, my lady.”

Hadley nearly jumped out of her skin and pushed herself against the back wall. “Who’s there?” Her heart pounded so hard she could hear it in her ears.

“We haven’t met yet but I was called to come take a look at you, so look I shall.” A man stepped out of the shadows who looked as if he could have been a part of the darkness himself.

“Who are you?”

There was something about this man that was so familiar to her. He seemed somehow like Hawk. Was it his height or something else? She hoped she wasn’t making this comparison based solely on his dark hair. As he approached, she became more convinced he was completely different from Hawk. His eyes, even though she could barely make them out in the darkness, looked cruel and distant. Even when he attempted to be mean, Hawk didn’t look like that.

The man bowed slightly from the neck. “My name is Dragon, Madame, and I have the dubious distinction of being Hawk’s older brother.”

“Ha.” Her voice shook as she laughed.

He stood inches from her, his face looming over her. “What is funny?”

“I thought ... I mean when I first saw you, I knew you looked like him.”

He shook his head. “With the exception of the dark hair, there are no similarities between us.”

A trickle of sweat formed on her neck. Wow, Dragon really made her uncomfortable. “Why don’t we go find Hawk together? I’m sure he’ll want to know you’re home.” She tried, and failed, to smile as she wished she could back up even further into the wall.

Dragon’s nostrils flared. “Are you sleeping with him? Is that why he’s kept you here,

hidden you away from your family and your rightful place in Haven? What is his real agenda?"

"I've been sick." Her hands started to shake and she felt a headache starting.

Pushing against Dragon's shoulders, she tried to get him to budge from his position so she could get some air.

"I'm not moving until you tell me what's going on."

Her head throbbed hard and heat fumed within her body. As the hall started to blur, she realized she might faint. God, did she not want that. Calling on every ounce of strength and willpower she possessed, she tried desperately to regain focus and at least make it back to the bed before she fell over. Dragon's stubbornness greatly hindered her plan.

The shadows on the wall began parading again. They danced in strange movements that she could only compare to the arrangements of marionette dolls. Closer and closer they approached until one nearly touched Dragon's back.

His eyes widened. "Are you unwell, Madame?"

She nodded. "Can't you seem them? Can't anyone else *see* them?" Her words came out as a sob. They were going to get her, potentially harm everything in their way and she was the only one who could make them out.

"Hadley." Hawk's voice was hard as he stormed down the hall and into her line of vision. But it was too late. The shadows jerked and jumped. Nothing felt solid or real.

"What have you done, Dragon?"

Hawk shoved his brother away and pulled Hadley into his arms. He felt like tissue paper. Solid but unsteady. Or maybe it was her who wasn't quite solid. She couldn't tell anymore.

"I was merely trying to test her, to see if what happened to her was real, I intimidated her a little bit."

"Does she look like she needs to be harmed? Hadley, can you hear me? Dear god what is happening to her?"

Dragon stepped forward again. "Her eyes, they're glowing."

"I can see that. What I don't understand is why."

Dragon grabbed her cheeks in his hands roughly and Hawk snarled at him. "Keep your possessiveness in check. Something *very* bad is happening here and I can't attest to what it is, which is what disturbs me the most."

Hadley saw Hawk rub her forehead although she couldn't actually say whether or not she felt the sensation. It was bizarre, as if she was aware of things happening around her but unable to connect with them.

She tried one more time. "Can't you see them, can't either of you?" The shadow creature in front of her reached out her hand as if she was to grasp it. She hissed in her breath. No way would she go with that thing voluntarily. It would have to come and take her by force.

"See what?" Dragon frowned.

Hawk shook his head. "It's delusions from the fever brought on by the healing. Last night she kept going on and on about the shadows."

Dragon took a step back into the shadow behind him and the creature that only Hadley could see made a sigh that sounded like nothing more than a door creaking. It was now directly in front of her.

Turning in a circle, Dragon examined the walls. When he turned back to her, his whole body glowed with a warm white light. “Hell, Hawk, I thought you said she was half-earthling.”

“She is. Can you help her or not?”

“I’m afraid you’re mistaken, brother. Not only is she one of us completely, she is possibly the most talented of our kind to be born in over a century.”

Hawk’s grip on her tightened until his knuckles turned white. “Not possible.”

“Things finally make sense to me, but there isn’t time for explanation. She is indeed in terrible danger and I suspect she can see the shadows moving even if I can’t. And the fact that they approach her is very bad, indeed. Cover her eyes. We mustn’t let them take her.”

Without question, Hawk placed his hand over her eyes and pushed his body in front of hers to block out more light.

“Lightning.” Dragon’s voice sounded, hard, and louder than before, and the hallway lit up like a nuclear bomb had gone off. The shadows screamed, a ghostly, agonized screech and the sound was deafening in her head.

Tears sprung from Hadley’s eyes as the agony of a million creatures being pushed into unnatural light filled her soul. Gripping onto Hawk even as she could not feel his touch, she lost consciousness.

Chapter Twelve

Hawk grabbed Hadley as she collapsed and scooped her up. Furious, he stormed into his bedroom and placed her gently on the bed. Assuring himself that she still breathed, he bore down on his brother.

“What the hell is going on? I want an answer, right now.”

Dragon sighed. “I came here, despite my intentions not to, in order to assess for myself and report to the King exactly what I thought happened to Hadley and to figure out if your story regarding her health and need of training was true.”

Hawk’s blood surged. He stalked to his brother, invading his space. “Are you calling me a liar?”

“Please,” Dragon rolled his eyes. “Can you spare me the Warrior theatrics? I endured them enough as a child and I won’t put up with them now.”

But Hawk wasn’t letting this go. “Do you have reason to doubt my word?”

“I have reason to mistrust everything said by a Warrior. I know better than most just how little regard you hold the truth when your own agenda is involved.”

If Dragon wasn’t careful, Hawk was going to punch him in the face. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“Other than your so-called loyalty to the royal family, the Warriors are by nature completely uninterested in the needs or desires of anyone else in this dimension.”

Hawk raised his fist and lowered it again. “If you weren’t my brother, I would kill you for that remark. Throughout the history of our people, no one has done more for this dimension than the Warriors. We sacrificed everything time and again for the needs of our people.”

Dragon shook his head. “Only when it fit your own agenda.”

Hawk roared and Hadley whimpered on the bed. He strode over to her and stroked her hair. “It’s okay, darling, all will be well.”

“That is the second time you have called her darling in my presence. What is this newfound affection, Hawk? Don’t you remember? Warriors throw their women aside daily for self-improvement and honor.”

Dragon had a point. In their dimension, that was precisely what Warriors did to their mates, which was why it required a particular kind of self-involved, tough woman to handle them. Usually a woman from a Warrior family married a Warrior man. But Hawk had just come from Earth. He’d seen love over the course of two and a half centuries. Sometimes it lasted, sometimes it didn’t, but he’d be damned if he didn’t want it for himself. He’d touched on it with Annabelle, but his recent feelings for Hadley dwarfed any he knew before.

“When I want your opinion on how I address this woman, I will ask for it. Now explain yourself before I show you just how little I think of Mystics by using my Warrior skills. You said Hadley was not half-earthling.”

Dragon nodded and paced to the window. “She’s not. I read her aura while we stood in the hall. She is clearly one of us. One hundred percent. This tells me that something has gone awry here. Tell me what happened when you arrived on earth. Start from the beginning.”

Hawk sighed and sat down on the bed next to Hadley. He'd expected to have to explain the events that led up to Zamara's troubles but he hadn't anticipated having to do it with Dragon. The King bothered him less than his brother.

He reached over and took a water glass from the cedar table next to his bed. Glad to see he hadn't finished the whole thing this morning, he took a sip before he started. Placing the glass back down, he began.

"We'd travelled three dimensions. The first one was a water dimension. I hated it, I prefer to fly, but Zamara was enchanted by the sea-life, albeit surprised she didn't see any Great Ones around. We moved on, the next one was a red dimension. By the end of it, Stone was sun burned and we were all hoping she was through. The truth is none of the first two dimensions took more than a week. It was like she was pretending to put in the time to travel, explore, and learn because she had to."

Dragon shook his head. "Only a week in each. You would have been home in three months. What was she thinking? The King would never have accepted that as a true lifetime trip. I don't remember Zamara being so foolish."

"You're right. When we were children, in our studies no one was more dedicated than Zamara to perfection. I joked with the men that if the average lifetime trip took one century, Zamara would complete hers precisely one week before the century mark and then make us wait the week just to be on time."

Dragon sat down in the chair across the room and stretched his legs out straight. Hawk glanced down at Hadley. He sighed, he felt sick about what happened to her.

Dragon stared at Hadley, a remote look in his dark eyes. "She'll be okay. I assure you. I'm nearly one hundred percent sure I know what happened. I just need to hear the whole story to be sure."

"At the end of the second dimension, Zamara was extremely agitated, desperate to move on and insisted it had to be the Earth dimension although it wasn't on our agenda." Hawk shrugged. "But I remembered that Dad told us the King switched trip plans three times on their journey so I adjusted coordinates and we moved on to Earth."

"A blue planet. You must have hated it, all that ocean."

"At first, but then it grew on me. With the exception of Pettigrew, the people are okay."

"Pettigrew isn't from Earth. But continue, I'll explain."

"Almost immediately upon arriving, Zamara made the acquaintance of this nothing of a man. Or at least he initially seemed that way. Within days, she declared herself in love with him and began a torrid affair."

Hawk closed his eyes for a moment on the images that assaulted his memory. It had been hell standing outside the door listening to the carnal acts going on inside of Zacharias' bedroom, wondering what the hell Zamara was doing with such an average, unremarkable person. But she hadn't broken any rules. She could take any lovers she wanted; at that point he had not foreseen her getting into any danger. He assumed she'd rid herself of the man before they left the dimension.

"It continued longer than I suspected it would, but it was her trip and if she wanted to spend the majority of it on Earth sleeping with that person, I had nothing to say on the matter as long as her safety was unaffected. Then one night the strangest thing happened while we guarded her."

Dragon sat up in his seat. "You fell asleep."

Hawk raised one eyebrow. "How the hell could you know that?"

"Because Zacharias is from here and he learned that in the Shadow Dimension. I promise, I'll explain why I know this, I just need you to continue."

Hawk worried his eyes might fall out of their sockets. *The Shadow dimension?* The one place the royals never went for fear of the enormous power there? By all that was holy, the one thing the Mystics spent more time on than any other was guarding the dimension from the Shadows.

He continued. "When we awoke, she seemed different. Not so strange that I noticed initially but it became more noticeable over time. Her eyes glazed over, she stopped having opinions, and she was no longer interested in leaving. Soon after, she became pregnant. At that point, she stopped speaking altogether. We tried several rescue attempts but every time we did, we'd hit a barrier of Zamara's own creation. It was as if a literal wall would form around her. We couldn't get through."

"And nine months later her baby was born."

"Annabelle."

Dragon raised an eyebrow. "More to tell there, huh?"

Hawk shook his head. "I'm not going to discuss her. I don't think she's relevant."

"Maybe she was why you were distracted for the next thirty years?"

Hawk rose from his seat and crossed to the window. Distracted was the right word for how he had been. "It doesn't matter. Pettigrew poisons them so they die at thirty if they don't hold enough of their mother's powers."

"Who told you that?"

It had been a long time since he'd had that conversation but as he'd stood silently and watched Clarice die, he hadn't been able to stand it anymore and demanded an answer from Pettigrew. Even if he wasn't important enough to be entitled to one.

"The monster himself."

"He lied."

"I watched them all die, Dragon. I'm not so dense that I can't tell when someone has passed away."

"No, Hawk." Dragon walked to the window next to Hawk. His eyes, for once, actually looked kind. "What you saw was them being taken to the shadows. It looks like a death."

"Like in the old legends and the fairy tales we tell children to get them to behave. Grandma used to tell them to me."

Dragon grinned. "Learn your lessons, practice your skills, or you won't be able to defend yourselves when the Shadows come. They can't get you if you're strong."

Hawk nodded, rubbing his chin. "Those are the ones."

"I don't know about you, but I used to lay awake in my bed staring at shadows wondering if they stared back at me."

"I don't remember ever being afraid of them."

Dragon rolled his eyes. "Of course you weren't. *You* were a born Warrior. Our parents should have known when I actually had nightmares that something was terribly wrong."

"There was never anything wrong with you. You just weren't a Warrior. You're a hugely respected, extremely talented Mystic. In most circles that's better."

Dragon shrugged. "But not here."

"I can't have this conversation with you again. Not now. You're telling me the shadow people are real, Pettigrew somehow gives his daughters to them, and Hadley is in danger from them now. How can you possibly know all this?"

"Because I looked through Hadley's eyes and I saw them too."

Hawk sucked in his breath. "You can do that? You're that powerful?"

Hell. He'd always been in awe of his brother, but now there really was reason to fear him. Very few people—the stuff of legends, really—reached that level of Mystical perfection. Hawk had only read about it in books. Warriors were only encouraged to go so far in their Mystical training. Their purpose in life was not to delve too far into the Mystics but to protect those who did.

Dragon merely nodded as if reaching that state of power was an everyday occurrence.

"How could Zacharias Pettigrew be one of us and how in heavens could he have cut a deal with the shadow people to give them his children?"

"Because his real name is Xander and he is the only man in the last two millennia to be banned from Haven for conducting secret, dangerous experiments in the hope of combining our dimension with that of the Shadow People. I don't know how he got to Earth and I had no idea he'd gone so far as to actually contact them, but it looks like he has everything he wants now."

"This is one of those stories kept quiet from the general population, isn't it?"

"For their protection."

"And for whatever reason he's always wanted a Royal Princess?"

Dragon drummed his hand on the wall. "He felt it was imperative that his bloodline be combined with a Royal's. Here, Royals and Royal Guardians are the only ones who can create a portal for inter-dimensional travel. Pettigrew thought he could create a race of people who could travel without aid in and out of dimensions."

"And you know this how?"

"Because for a while, my ill-informed little brother, he was my teacher and mentor."

Hawk narrowed his eyes. "How is that possible if he was banned two millennia ago?"

"For a person who has dimension-travelled you still think so linearly."

"That's the only answer you're going to give me, isn't it."

Dragon's superior smile was his only response.

"There's more, Dragon. We all started to change, to mutate."

"Now this surprises me." Dragon paced the room excitedly. "Mutate how exactly? I don't see any scales or wings on you."

"First it became apparent that none of us could die. Anytime someone would be killed, no matter how brutally, we shifted back to ourselves as long as our pieces could find each other and reform. It was possible to stop the reformation by boxing us, eliminating our space to do it, but besides that, none of us could die. Our minds would take us back here momentarily and then boom, we'd be in terrible pain, and back on earth."

Dragon jumped from foot to foot. "How many times did you die?"

"Don't look so damn excited about my death. You're practically dancing on my grave."

"It's not the death that interests me, it's the regeneration." Hawk noted his brother

stopped his happy dance.

“I lost track of how many times. Twice yesterday.” Was it yesterday? Dimensional travel always screwed up his sense of these things.

“That frequently with no obvious signs on the outside that it ever happened. Can you die now?”

“I have no idea. I’ve not had the chance to find out since we’ve been back. The other thing that happened was that we all started to develop powers. Prize grew to giant size overnight and several others were suddenly able to do Mystical things they’d never done before.”

“Mystical things?”

“Exactly.”

“What happened to you?”

“I could float or fly into the air.”

Dragon rolled his eyes, obviously unimpressed with his talent.

“It’s really your death ability that I’m focused on. Let’s see, shall we?”

Without warning, Dragon drew a knife from under his jeans and plunged it into Hawk’s stomach.

Hadley’s scream was the last thing Hawk heard as he hit the ground in agonizing pain.

Chapter Thirteen

Hadley leapt from the bed, modesty be damned if her shirt flew over her waist, and threw herself on top of Dragon's back. She needed to help Hawk, but it seemed imperative to rid the knife-wielding lunatic of his weapon first.

"Calm yourself, Madame, I am merely conducting an experiment to see if he can die."

Squeezing her arms around his neck, she hoped she could choke him. "Look at the blood, you imbecile. Obviously, he can die here. Trust me—when he burned to a crisp and regenerated on Earth there was no blood or evidence of pain."

Hawk moaned and Hadley let go of Dragon's neck. Her attempts at strangulation would have been futile anyway; she could never actually kill anybody, even if they deserved it.

Hitting the floor in a jumble of limbs, she jumped to her feet. "Come after me or hurt me in any way and you'll be in big trouble. I gather my presence here is important to many very powerful people. I'm not sure what kind of penal system you have but unless you want to find yourself in it, I suggest you back off."

Dragon raised an eyebrow and stepped back. "By all means, if you think you can help him, have at it."

Sinking to her knees next to Hawk, she stroked his forehead. "Can you hear me?" Wow, there was a lot of blood and her first aid and CPR training were years behind her. Wherever she had worked, there had always been a medical doctor present. Hawk didn't respond.

She glared at Dragon. "What are you doing? Go get help."

"I think not. I'm rather curious to see what you will do for him."

"Help." Hadley shouted hoping someone would hear here and then turned to Hawk. Placing her hands on his rapidly bleeding stomach wound, she applied as much pressure as she could but it didn't seem to stem the flow of red crimson.

She couldn't let him die. There had to be *something* she was capable of doing. Her skin started to tingle and she almost let go of Hawk's wound from the surprise of it. What was happening here?

Energy flowed from inside of her. It felt like flames igniting and cooling as they pushed their way through her skin and into Hawk. In front of her eyes, Hawk's wound began to stitch together and mend. New skin formed where moments earlier there had been none.

Hadley closed her eyes as the pain of her newfound power threatened to overtake her. A hand gripped her wrist and her eyes flew open. Hawk's green meadow eyes met hers and she cried out in relief.

"Hadley, stop."

She shook her head. "It wasn't finished yet. I can still feel pain inside of you."

"I'm fixed. It's good enough."

No, it wasn't, not when she was capable of making it all go away, of setting him right where he had carried pain for so long. If she just kept at for another couple of seconds, he would be fine again.

“I’m mended. I’m not going to die. You’ve done enough.”

Sweat formed on her forehead and dripped down in large quantities down her cheeks. She didn’t even care. “I can feel that you’re not right, I can almost see it.”

“Stop.” His eyes flared. “My physical pain is healed. The rest of it I am meant to carry.”

His words passed through the intensity that clouded her brain and she had to agree there were some things other people couldn’t fix. She’d learned early on in life that her burdens were often what made her stronger. She nodded and even though it felt like lifting a cannon ball, she pulled her hands off him.

He sat up, pulled her into his arms, and whispered in her ear. “You are never to risk yourself for me again. Ever. I take care of you, not the other way around.”

“Maybe whatever this is between us means that we’re supposed to take care of each other.”

“You’re not to touch anyone’s emotional pain. It’s not your job to undo everyone’s scars in that department.” He reached out and poked her in the nose.

A small noise from the corner of the room reminded Hadley they weren’t alone and she turned expecting to find Dragon glowering in the corner, but instead of just Hawk’s brother alone, the entire Warrior force and Hawk’s mother Leopard stood, mouths gaping open as they watched the scene.

Uncomfortable at being caught in a state of near embrace, she pulled gently from Hawk’s steady arms.

“You just healed him.” Leopard’s voice shook as she spoke. “You saved my son with nothing more than your hands. Can all people from Earth do such things?”

Dragon laughed. “Oh, she might have been born in that dimension, mother, but she is one hundred percent one of us.”

Hadley shook her head. “What?”

Hawk rubbed her arm, a delicate circle with the tip of his finger. “We’ll explain, there is much we need to tell you. A lot I didn’t understand.”

Dragon stomped over and offered Hawk his hand. “Looks like you are not indestructible here. Or at least you wouldn’t be if not for her.”

Hawk took his hand and stood. “This isn’t over. I will not forget what you did.”

Dragon’s eyes flared. “Then I will look forward to your retribution.”

Leopard hissed. “Stop that, you two. You still act like children. Dragon,” she rushed over and grabbed his arm. “You’re not home an hour and already your brother is lying on the floor bleeding while you make idle threats. If he really wanted to physically harm you, there is not much you could do.”

Hadley had never seen the older woman do anything but love and scold gently before. It turned out the woman was a force to be reckoned with and she wasn’t done giving out her opinions.

“And you.” She pointed at Hawk. “While you were gone, your brother became the most Mystically powerful man in Haven.”

Hawk nodded. “I gathered that.”

“Then you know it he’d really meant to kill you, he would have summoned a dark power and blown you up before you could blink. Whatever his reasons, I think he knew you wouldn’t die here today. Now, it’s late and everyone is awake, so I’m going to the kitchen to see if we have anything we could all possibly eat. Sort it out or don’t, but I

won't have you dragging Hadley into the middle of this never ending sibling rivalry or feud or whatever you want to call it." She huffed. "Grow up."

Having never had a mother she knew and having gone out of her way to never upset her father, she'd never been dressed down by a parent. Her cheeks grew hot thinking how upset Hawk and Dragon must be, but when she looked up, they both seemed relatively unscathed.

"Shall we go to the kitchen then?" Hawk offered his arm to her, which she took, and they crossed the room.

In one swift movement, each of Hawk's men fell down on one knee, their heads bowed to her.

Hadley sucked in her breath. "What are they doing?"

"Honoring you."

She shook her head. "Why?"

"Because what you just did, the way you saved me, it was a Royal power thought long dead. We all owe you our fealty and this is how they have chosen to express it."

Hadley's stomach turned. "Please, all of you get up. I'm not used to any of this. Even where I'm from on Earth—well you all know America. We don't do this sort of thing. It's very gallant and I'm touched but I have no idea how to handle it. I hope I don't seem ungrateful."

"Up." Hawk commanded the Warrior men and they rose, their heads still bowed. "Even if she doesn't want the show of honor, I expect you all to continue to live by the oath I know each of you silently took today."

"Yes, my Prince." The unity in which the group spoke reminded Hadley of the military units back home—which immediately made her think of Hailey. She needed to keep focused on her goal, no matter what life threw at her, nor any feelings for Hawk. There was a ticking time bomb threatening to go off on her thirtieth birthday and she wouldn't face it alone. Her twin sister knew none of this and only Hadley could prevent what was to come for both of them.

* * * *

Hadley sat at the table sipping tea as her mind whirled with thoughts. She wasn't an Earthling, her father had cut some sort of deal with the Shadow People who were now trying to claim her, and she was quite possibly the most powerful being born of Haven blood in two centuries. Setting down her teacup, she placed her head in her hands.

Just two days ago, all she'd wanted was to see the Giant Squid alive. Truthfully, she still wanted that but it was lower on her list of priorities. Now she really wanted to stay living herself so she could figure this whole mess out.

Spread out on both sides of the long dining table, the Warriors laughed at some joke Stone made while Dragon and Hawk continued whatever secret conversation the two had been having since they reached the kitchen. She hoped they weren't quietly threatening each other or plotting each other's deaths.

"In all my years living with Warriors," Leopard's voice intruded on her thoughts and Hadley pulled her hands off her face. "I have never seen them laugh like this. My whole life has been devoted to Warriors. I was the daughter of a very powerful man and the wife of the most powerful Warrior of his time. No laughter, not like this, not ever."

Hadley cleared her throat. Leopard's face was blank, her eyes lost in thought and

Hadley had no idea if the other woman loathed or liked this occurrence. “On Earth, men laugh. Sometimes they find the most inappropriate things funny or their senses of humor bewilder the women in their lives, but they do behave jovially, as much as possible. In fact, a sense of humor is one of the things a woman looks for when choosing a husband or a boyfriend.”

Leopard nodded and Hadley stared at the window, which allotted her a view of the sun rising over the horizon.

“In all the years I was married to their father, he never spoke to me with any kind of endearments. I’ve never heard any men do that before.”

Hadley was confused. “Which endearments are you referring to?”

“Darling.”

Heat suffused Hadley’s face. Right, Hawk had been using that term to refer to her. “Oh. I think, although I’ve never asked him, that Hawk spent a lot of time recently in the southern part of the country where I am from. Down there, many people use those terms in their daily conversations. I don’t think it means anything of significance, only that he adapted his speech to that particular pattern.”

Leopard smiled but it didn’t reach her eyes. “I don’t think so.”

“You don’t?”

“I know smitten when I see it and that is how my middle child feels about you.”

“It’s complicated. He was in love with my deceased sister. Being with me causes him pain and the fact that it makes him upset makes me unable to let my guard down for him.”

Hadley would never have imagined having this conversation with Hawk’s mother, but the other woman had brought it up.

“I’m sorry to hear she died. Death isn’t something we face with young people, unless they are killed in battle. I imagine he feels terrible about it. Hawk has a need to save those around him. It’s bred into his genetic code. He can’t help it. But you were given to us and it was my son who brought you. I believe that means something.” Leopard raised one eyebrow. “There was a time when at least one Royal Princess a generation wed a Warrior. It was tradition. But it fell by the wayside as people started to become more focused on remaining true to their so-called roots.”

“You say that as though you don’t agree with it.”

Leopard sighed. “Even though my husband had saved the king and performed endless acts of bravery, we were, for a time, treated like pariahs when Dragon was born and it became clear over time that he was not a Warrior. It is not unheard of for a non-Warrior to be born into a Warrior family, but it isn’t exactly desirable either. I didn’t even know any Mystics well enough to ask them to train him. The King had to intervene. I can’t believe we’re meant to live like that. People are people, no matter our metaphysical talents.”

“It sounds like that’s how it should be to me.”

“I thought you might think so.” Leopard glowed with happiness. “Besides, you and Hawk would have the most beautiful babies.”

“*Babies?*” The cup Hadley clutched nearly spilled over. “I think we’re ten steps ahead of ourselves. Where I’m from, men who look like Hawk don’t look at women like me. I’m not nearly pretty enough.”

“Have you looked in the mirror lately?”

Hadley laughed. “I know, I’m much improved since I arrived here, but I can assure you when I grew up it was made terribly clear by every member of the male species that I met that while I was great to pal around with, my desirability in the sack was slim to none.”

Leopard shook her head. “How could that possibly be?”

“Red hair, freckles, and glasses might be cute on eight-year-olds, but it’s not hot on me.”

“Hadley, even here we all go through awkward phases. It is possible you never stopped seeing yourself that way when the rest of the world sees you quite differently?”

“I don’t think so.” Where was Leopard going with this?

“Hawk, my son.” Leopard turned her attention to her middle child, who stopped his conversation immediately to look at her. “Do you find Hadley has changed a great deal physically since she arrived?”

Hawk narrowed his eyes and shook his head. “No, mother, I don’t. Why do you ask?”

“Because Hadley seems to think she’s not attractive enough to be with you. I was just wondering if somehow she had changed a great deal because I have never heard such ridiculousness in my life.”

With that statement, Leopard stood up and left the table. Hadley blushed so hard she wondered that she didn’t burn up. Hoping to make a quick exit, she stood up and intended to make a quick beeline for her room, which was of course why she lost her footing, knocked over tea, and took a header straight to the floor. Damn, she’d never been graceful ... but this was the worst.

Chapter Fourteen

He had no experience dealing with women when they made no coherent sense. His sister had been thirty years younger than him, still a baby when he'd become a man. His mother seemed otherworldly and even remote when he'd been a child, and Annabelle had been easy to please, quick to laugh, and untroubled by life's problems.

Hawk mused on these thoughts as he followed Hadley down the hall towards her bedroom. Her stiff posture gave away her annoyance and embarrassment at the earlier scene in the kitchen. She stopped halfway down the hall and turned to him.

"Which one is my room?"

Smirking, he watched her eyes flare. "You don't remember which one is your room?"

"I've only been here one day, I think. I'm losing all sense of time and I have spent so much blasted time in your room I can't quite remember which one is mine. I don't want to bust in on one of the men if he's sleeping."

He pointed to her room three doors down. "You'll find clothes in there. I think my mother gave you some of Rabbit's, you're about the same size, and there's also some bath stuff."

She nodded and turned her back to him again. "Thanks."

Walking to the door he'd indicated, she opened it and stepped inside. Immediately, he realized she meant to shut the door in his face and he stuck his foot in the way before she could.

Putting her hands on her hips, she tilted her head to the right. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Look, I don't see why you're so upset or embarrassed or whatever you are. You fell, what's the big deal?" He fell all the time, if he pouted about it every time he happened he'd be perpetually upset.

"Ah." She threw her hands in the air. "You think I'm embarrassed because I took a spill?" She shook her head.

"So explain it to me." He pushed open the door. Damned if he'd be shut out of her room before he ever technically got in it. Whatever this was they'd either work it out or she'd get over it.

She picked up a pillow and smacked him with it. Stunned, he put up an arm to block her from her next assault. As she pounded on his body with the duck-feather pillow, he had to give her credit for technique. Once she started an assault, she didn't hesitate or back down.

"I am embarrassed because your mother told everyone, but most especially you, that I don't think I'm attractive enough to be with you."

"What?" He grabbed the pillow and pulled it out of her hand. She rushed back to the bed and grabbed another one, holding it up against herself like a shield. "I thought that was some kind of joke."

"A joke?" Her eyes shot daggers at him. "My feelings of insecurity and unwantedness are a laughing matter to you?"

"Did you make up that word?"

“What?” Her voice had raised two octaves; he wasn’t sure what that meant.

“*Unwantedness*. I think you’ve invented that word.”

“This isn’t a joke. I’m humiliated.”

“It was the most ridiculous thing I’d ever heard. You’re a beautiful, smart, accomplished woman and as the first Warrior to fail in his mission in well, ever, I am not exactly a catch and it’s not as though you’re from here and therefore so impressed with my family name that you’re desperate to marry into this mess we call a family.”

“I’m completely confused, Hawk. You aren’t making any sense to me.”

“Tell me which part of ‘I think you are beautiful and I want you to stop thinking you aren’t’ you don’t understand?”

“Do you mean that?”

He nodded. “I do.” His heart pounded.

“I’m disgusting.”

“Alright, now I’m getting really mad at you.” If she were a man who said that about her, he’d kill them. As it was, he couldn’t kill her but he still wanted to strangle her.

“No, I mean I’m gross.” She pulled on his old tee shirt that she wore. “I haven’t showered since I’ve been here and I’ve been sick twice.”

He pointed at the bathroom. “Shower is there.”

“Does it work like the ones back home?”

“Here,” he placed his hand under her arm and walked with her to the bathroom. The showers on earth had involved knobs, the ones here were buttons. Since she was beyond bright, he was sure she could have figured it out but it was an excuse to touch her, to walk with her, to look at her legs one more time under his tee shirt. At that thought, his groin hardened and he wished he could adjust his pants. But she’d already said no, and that meant the same thing no matter what dimension they were in.

He opened the door to the shower. “This much is the same.” He motioned toward the stall. “This button does hot, this one cold, and these two make it hotter or colder.”

When she launched herself at him, he nearly stumbled backwards. Her mouth met his desperately, begging him to kiss her. He complied. All thoughts of why were unimportant to him.

He’d wanted Hadley from the moment he’d laid eyes on her and if she had finally come around to his way of thinking, he would gladly comply. Mouth to mouth, tongue to tongue, he couldn’t get enough of her.

More, he needed more from Hadley. He pushed her into the stall and against the shower wall. She pulled at his shirt. Gods, she was aggressive and he never would have guessed it. He loved it. Hadley managed to get one of his arms out of his shirt before he had to help her.

Pushing her more firmly against the wall, he braced her with one knee while he pulled his shirt all the way over his head. Her hands grasped his chest, finding his thick coarse hair, weaving her hands through it and he shuddered.

He wanted her shirt off right now.

“Raise your arms.” God, with her body pressed to his like this, he knew there had to be a divine being. It was as if she’d been made to fit against him. With her arms above her head, he took off her shirt, nearly ripping it in his intent to get to her.

Her body lay before him, against the wall, an exquisite sight. There was only one thing he needed to perfect the moment. Pulling off his pants so he was as naked as she

was, he pushed the button to turn on the hot water, and pulled her in under the spray behind him.

“Oh god, Hawk, yes ... this is exactly what I needed.”

“Sex, hot water, and Hadley—it’ll be like heaven for me too.”

“I want this, Hawk, I want this completely.”

Under the gentle pounding of the hot spray, he smiled. “Me too, darling, me too.”

He leaned down to kiss her neck, sucking gently and resisting the urge to bite, to mark her as his for the world to see.

Hadley grabbed his face in her hands. So many emotions played in her eyes and he wished he had a mind reading device so he could know what she thought, what she needed.

“Don’t seduce me, not now, Hawk. I don’t need anything but you inside of me. I might be dead in six months, just let me feel alive now.”

He needed to feel that way, too and there was nothing that would be more heavenly than the feeling of being deep inside Hadley as she shattered around him. Pushing her lithe body up against the wall of the shower, he pulled her leg up and around his hip, opening her up to him.

Plunging inside of her felt like coming home, as if he’d looked for it his entire life and now he’d found it. He closed his eyes, hoping they could go on this way forever. In and out, she moaned and made the most delicious tiny noises in the back of her throat. He opened his eyes. With her head thrown back and the hot water surrounding her, she was the most sensuous sight he’d ever witnessed.

Harder, he needed to be inside of her deeper but he wasn’t sure how much longer he could last if he kept looking at her looking like that.

Moments later, he felt her explode around him. Thanking the heavens for this moment, he followed, spilling himself inside of her as she clung to him shouting his name.

* * * *

“Thank you for getting the shampoo out of my hair.”

He smiled, snuggling in closer behind her. “It was the least I could do considering I stopped you from doing it yourself.” They’d stumbled through an actual shower, stopping several times just to explore each others’ body.

“If I recall correctly, I jumped you.”

Yes she had and he wished he could play the image of her doing so over and over in his mind on an endless loop. “Well, I did bring you into the bathroom. Don’t think there is a man in any dimension who would do that without the intention of having you in the shower.”

Hadley giggled. “So romantic.”

“If we had more time, if there weren’t all these things pressing on us tomorrow, I could show you romance the likes of which you’ve never imagined. We would walk on the cliffs not far from here and I would feed you from the tree that never stops growing fruit. All year, even in the winter, it produces fruit.”

“Sounds very fertile. Where I’m from, and you probably know this, women would flock there to try to get impregnated thinking its endless production would somehow transfer to them.”

Hawk shrugged. "Maybe it would. I think a lot of things are possible there."

"I think this has to be the strangest pillow talk I've ever done."

Wrapping himself closer, he picked up her hand and kissed it. "Why?"

"I don't know. We're talking about fruit trees and fertility problems. Kind of random."

She smelled like peaches and he knew the shampoo and soap they'd just coated themselves in did not contain such an aroma. It was just Hadley's natural scent. He closed his eyes. "What would you like to talk about?"

"I don't know. I don't think there is anything we can talk about that isn't going to make us stressed, worried, or upset."

"We can talk about your shoulder blades and the curve of your neck. That won't make us worry." In fact, the thought of them made him hard. He smiled and opened his eyes.

"Hawk."

"Feel that, did you?"

"They're here Hawk." Her voice shook. "Why won't they leave me alone?"

All sexual excitement fled immediately. "The Shadows, you can see them?"

"See them, hear them, and feel them."

Hawk scanned the room. Once again, he couldn't experience any of what she did. It made him feel incredibly ineffectual. How the hell was he supposed to protect her from something he couldn't feel on any level?

"What do they want, Hadley?"

"Me." Her voice was barely a whisper.

"They can't have you." He spoke as loudly as he could hoping they could hear him. He needed his weapons.

As if reading his mind, she grabbed his arm. Her eyes were far away, distant. "You can't fight them with any weapons you possess. They want you to know that. But they *can* hurt you. If you provoke them, they *will* hurt you."

"That doesn't make any sense. How can I provoke them if I can't even see them? What do they think—my voice is offensive?"

She didn't answer him. He shook her gently and she didn't acknowledge him at all. Damn it, he was losing her. They would take her and then there would be nothing left but her body, which would wither and die. No, he couldn't let it happen.

"Hawk," her shout was pained. "They're taking me now. I don't want to go but they say my father gave me to them at birth. They've waited and now it's my turn to repay the debt owed."

He pulled her to him. "Do you feel me, Hadley? This is real. I'm real, you're real and this is where you need to stay. Keep yourself here with me."

"That's not possible anymore." Her voice had taken on a monotone quality that tore into his heart.

In his arms, she collapsed, her eyes rolled to the back of her head. He grabbed her chin and shook it. "Hadley."

Nothing. He pressed his ear against her chest. Her heart still beat. That meant there was still a little bit of time. But he knew from experience that it wouldn't last. On earth, he'd thought it was the poison ending the Pettigrew women's life but now he knew better. Twenty-four hours until the Shadows took her and there was nothing left here of Hadley

but an empty, dead shell.

He laid her gently down on the bed, kissing her on her forehead. What they'd started tonight, hell what had been brewing between them since the day he'd first laid eyes on her, would not end this way.

Shoving on his shorts, he ran into the hall.

"Dragon." He ran towards his brother's room and pounded on the door.

Hawk heard Dragon charge at the door. "What is with you and not letting me ever get any damn sleep?"

"I need you to send me to the Shadow world. They've just taken Hadley."

Dragon raised an eyebrow. "Well, today may turn out to be interesting after all."

Chapter Fifteen

Hadley couldn't believe her eyes. What had seemed spooky, dressed in only the darkest black color was actually a world filled with brightness. She looked up at the sky, and sucked in her breath. The heavens above her were white, not black. Closing her eyes, she wished for the impossible and asked the universe to bring Hawk to her.

The landscape was sparse. In the distance, she could see bent-over trees and even further away there was some sort of structure. A castle, maybe, or a very large house. She had no frame of reference to judge by. But where she stood was completely barren, like a cleared field that had been long devoid of vegetation.

"Are you Hadley?" A female voice startled her and she whirled around. The woman who stood before her was tall and blonde. She spoke with a raspy voice, the kind she'd seen in Kathleen Turner movies when she'd been younger.

"I am." Determined to stay brave she lifted up her chin in an act she hoped looked defiant. "Why have you brought me here?"

"I didn't bring you anywhere. I was brought here, the same as you." The woman extended her hand. "My name is Deirdre and I think we are sisters."

"You're D, the one Hawk couldn't watch pass away."

"Did he leave the group after he thought I died? Wow, I suppose I should be honored but that all feels so far away for me, like it was eons ago. Time moves a little differently here. As you can see, I haven't aged a day since my, ah, death."

Hadley looked at the other woman and couldn't help but notice the similarities between them. Or rather the similarities between Deirdre and Hailey. Although Hadley looked a great deal like Hailey, technically they weren't identical twins. There were some distinct differences between them. Hadley's face was slightly longer than Hailey's. The shape of Deirdre's face was exactly the same.

A slight spread of freckles covered Deirdre's nose, another tribute Hailey shared that Hadley didn't. Her own freckles were everywhere, like a spotted leopard. All three women seemed to be exactly the same size in height although Deirdre was slimmer, much like Hailey.

It was an odd moment. There was no protocol for meeting a sister you never knew you had in a shadow dimension you didn't until recently even know existed. Realizing she stared, Hadley looked down at the ground.

What had happened to her manners?

"I'm sorry to be rude, I'm just a little overwhelmed right now."

"It's okay. I remember staring at Annabelle and Clarice when I first arrived. I hadn't known they existed. You obviously know Hawk, did he mention us? Father usually forbids them from mentioning the other girls."

Hadley shook her head. "Hawk has deserted and returned to Haven to try to get help for our mother. I know about all of it now but I didn't know previously."

Deirdre raised one eyebrow. "You were in Haven. No wonder they got you early."

Hadley glanced back at up at the white sky one more time, unable to believe the difference between it and Haven and Earth's blue one. "What do you mean?"

"It's a little hard to get us from Earth. This dimension, the Shadow dimension,

doesn't have as good a connection to Earth as it does to Haven. It takes them thirty years to get girls from there. But you're still not quite thirty, right?"

"That's right." Hadley let out a breath she hadn't known she was holding. That meant they hadn't gotten Hailey yet. There was still time to get out this. Well, she hoped there was, anyway.

"Follow me, we have to take you to your pod."

"My pod?"

"It's where you will live until you are claimed."

Hadley moved forward and grabbed Deirdre's arm. As she moved she became aware of the strange feeling on her legs. She glanced down at herself. Dressed entirely in dark brown, she wore a makeshift dress made out of material that resembled a hospital gown she'd once been forced to wear when she'd needed her appendix out. It shuffled as she moved. Her feet, too, were in industrial quality slippers better served for walking neon-filled halls than dirt and rocks.

Deirdre wore plain black pants and a black turtleneck, indicating to Hadley that if this were the arrival outfit, she would most likely not have to stay in it permanently. Her entire transportation to the Shadow Dimension felt distant to Hadley, even though it had just happened. She couldn't quite remember what happened after they'd pulled her in. Darkness. And then standing in the clearing.

"Who is going to be claiming me?"

Deirdre sighed. She grabbed Hadley's arm and as she looked right and left in what Hadley could best call a defensive gesture, she pulled Hadley with her until they both stood hidden behind a large black bush that was nearly dead.

"Technically, Annabelle should be explaining this to you because she is the head of our family. But she's changing. I'm not certain how to explain it but she's less and less communicative, more and more interested in simply leading a spiritual life and she'll probably just confuse you to death. So I'll do it but don't tell anyone that I did because, again, technically, this is supposed to be Bethany's job if Annabelle doesn't do it or after her, Clarice. I'm fourth in the line of importance."

"So all of you are here. A through G." Hadley's mind whirled as if she'd just been hit by a tornado. Tears filled her eyes and she laughed. Deirdre sounded just like her, spoke just like her, and Hadley had understood her perfectly. Even Hailey didn't share her thought patterns that closely.

Deirdre smiled and rubbed Hadley's arms. Once again showing how closely they shared thoughts, as most people would have no idea why she'd teared up.

"Annabelle, Bethany, Clarice, and I are all here. We've all been claimed. Annabelle has a child, although he was taken from her years ago, as is customary, and no one has seen him since. Bethany should be entering that cycle soon. Eliza and Fiona were scooped up in the middle of the night and, I guess, transported somewhere else, we have no idea."

Hadley swallowed. So it wasn't bad enough she'd been brought here, she could be taken again. "And G?"

"Grace, well, she didn't transition very well, which is why we've all been very worried about you and your twin sister. They sent her to the mines. It's where all the men work. This planet, as dark and lifeless as it is, is filled with all sorts of Mystical currency. It's what they sell, the incentive they offer to leaders to get them to give over their

women. One of the things they mine is called Breathless. They give it to our father, it keeps him alive endlessly and forever young.” Deirdre smiled, but it didn’t reach her eyes. “But you seem to be steadier than she was, less flighty, so I’m sure they’ll keep you to mate with and not send you into those places.”

Hadley silently winced, because if traits ran in families, then Deirdre had just described Hailey to a tee and, as she’d already suspect, Hailey would not do well with any of this, not at all.

Shaking away that thought, Hadley whispered all of her sisters’ names once. It wouldn’t do, now that she knew them, to call them A through G.

Deirdre still hadn’t answered her question. “Who is going to claim me?”

“Here’s what’s happened, although I’m unclear as to the timing of everything, but at some point, the Shadow People stopped producing females. Slowly they started to die. So in order to ensure the continuation of their people, they started stealing women from other places. We, in turn, get taken from our dimension. Our bodies are left behind and we ‘die’ there. Our father wanted endless life, the Shadow People have the means to give it to him, so he, in turn, presents us to them as gifts of a sort.”

“Oh, like hell.” Hadley clenched her fists. “I am not going to be breeding for anyone. Our mother does quite enough of that, thank you. No, we are finding another way out of here. Hawk and the others, they know about this place now, either they or I will find us an escape.”

Deirdre’s smile was sad, no warmth met her eyes. “Well, I hope you are more successful than I was.”

Hadley’s heart bled for Deirdre. The other woman had obviously once tried for escape herself. She hooked her arm in her sister’s. “Okay, take me where I am supposed to go. There are five Pettigrew women here now, I am quite certain we can handle anyone and anything.”

Moments later, she sat cross-legged in a makeshift tent Deirdre had referred to as a pod. Introductions were made to Bethany, dark haired like their father, and thin like a beanpole, and Clarice who, in contrast, had white-blond hair and ten pounds too many on her that, in her sister’s case, didn’t make her look fat, just curvy. Annabelle still hadn’t emerged, which Hadley was just fine with.

What was she supposed to say to her oldest sister? *Oh hey, thinking I would never have to face the music with you, I decided it was okay to sleep with the love of your life as if you had never existed?*

Hadley swallowed. No, she definitely wouldn’t be saying that. She still wasn’t really sure how much they knew about her. Deirdre had sounded surprised that she knew Hawk so maybe Annabelle didn’t actually know about it. Shaking her head, Hadley decided against chickening out. She’d wait for an appropriate time and tell her. And if, say, that particular perfect time never arrived, then she never needed to say anything. She closed her eyes, knowing in her soul that wasn’t the answer either. Realizing she was being rude, Hadley opened her eyes. Bethany babbled on about the things Deirdre had already told her. Not wanting to get the sister she felt the closest to in trouble, Hadley listened again, nodding at the appropriate times and asking what she hoped were the right questions.

“Who were the ones who came and got me and how did you know I was here?”

Bethany opened her mouth to speak but a voice from the back of the room caught her attention. “When I first came here, I thought I’d died and actually been sent to hell, but

now I know that all things happen based on our chosen paths.”

Hadley whirled around, her rear end scraping the floor as she did so. In front of her stood a statuesque redhead who looked like she belonged on the cover of a magazine. She didn’t need to ask who it was; instinctively she knew it was Annabelle. The skin on her arms tingled; there was no way Hadley could ever compete with her in the looks department if it came down to Hawk making a choice.

Annabelle crossed the room and pulled Hadley into a tight embrace. “Welcome, sister.”

Tears filled Hadley’s eyes and this time spilled down her cheek. They were sisters, not rivals for the attention of a man—even if Hadley happened to love that man. The thought struck her dumb. She’d thought it so naturally, as if she’d been thinking it for years. She did love Hawk. But it didn’t really matter. Annabelle loved him first. If, and it was a big if, Hadley somehow got them all out of there, she would have to find a way to reconcile herself with things if Hawk still loved and chose Annabelle.

She shook her head. This was not the right time for any of this. Bethany stood, her eyes shooting daggers at Annabelle. Uh oh, there was some sort of tension between the two women and Hadley felt certain she didn’t want to get in the middle of it.

“As I was just about to answer you,” Bethany tugged on Hadley’s arm until she was no longer in Annabelle’s embrace. “The men who came for you are the grabbers, they have a special ability for dimension travel and they knew where you were, I would guess, because our father told them.” Her dark eyes flared as she spoke the last bit. Bethany was obviously a woman who harbored a lot of anger. Hadley got the distinct impression she wasn’t to be trifled with and made a mental note not to make an enemy out of her.

Thunder sounded in the air and Hadley jumped. She hadn’t realized it was about to rain. The four women hung their heads and moved to the center of the living area where five rugs were laid out. On top of each rug was a folded wool blanket that looked to be too short to actually cover Hadley’s entire body. Was that where they were sleeping?

Clarice pointed to a rug next to hers and Hadley walked over to it. “Is the thunder some sort of signal to go to bed?”

Clarice shook her head. “Not technically, but it rains hard every night. We can be guaranteed that in a few moments, the lights will go out and we’ll be plunged into complete darkness. The men don’t mind it; they can see perfectly, maybe better, without light. But there’s nothing for us to do but go to bed.”

Hadley unfolded the scratchy blanket and lay down. This was a far cry from the bed she’d shared with Hawk earlier in the night. There wasn’t even a pillow. With the lights still illuminated she could see the other woman had made balls of their blankets and used them as cushions for their heads. It must not get too cold here at night. She followed suit and tried to make herself comfortable.

If everything about the situation was odd, and heaven knew it was, then lying on a floor with four sisters she knew nothing about was the cherry on top of the sundae for Hadley.

She cleared her throat. “So how come none of you are with your—well, with the men who claimed you?”

Annabelle rolled over onto her stomach. “They may still come for us, tonight, little sister, or they might not. It will depend on whether or not they have need for us.”

Hadley shivered. She had no intention of lying on a floor waiting to see if a man had

need for her. This was like something out of a nightmare.

“So, they just come, and you—uh, you’re ... available for them?” She needed to be very sure she understood just how awful this was.

A tear flowed down Clarice’s face. “That’s just about it. Ha. Sometimes they just want us to clean up their homes but sometimes it’s just what you’re imagining it is.”

Hadley wasn’t a damsel, and she’d never imagined that she’d want to be rescued by a knight in shining armor, but if Hawk rode up on a horse right now, she wouldn’t complain.

The lights went out and thunder sounded in the sky again followed by the sound of hard rain on the tin roof of their tent.

She’d never felt so alone in her life and in desperation she closed her eyes, pleading with the universe that she could sleep.

Chapter Sixteen

“Tell me again why you’re all coming with me?” Hawk stomped around the room for maybe the tenth time.

“We will not leave Lady Hadley to those creatures.”

Stone’s voice sounded viler than Hawk had ever heard before. Hawk reached out and grasped the other man’s shoulder. Hadley knew how to inspire loyalty in those around her in a very brief period of time. Normally, he would insist on doing this alone, but in the great possibility that he failed, he counted on one of them to complete the job and see that his woman came to no harm.

His woman. He closed his eyes. Even now, she might be pregnant with his baby. His heart sped up at the thought. They had taken no precautions to prevent conception. The chances were unlikely, due to their long life spans people in Haven took a very long time to conceive, he and Dragon were one hundred years apart, but there was still a possibility.

He’d meant to kidnap Hailey and leave Hadley alone. Fate had thrown the wrong sister at him, but she’d turned out to be completely right for him in every way. Nothing would keep him from her.

He turned his head to Dragon, who watched him in silence. “And you? Why are you coming?”

His older brother rolled his dark eyes in disgust. “I would think it would be obvious. I am the only one who can get us there, and I am the only one who can get us back. You’re going to require me to be present at the exit site.”

Hawk didn’t buy it, not for one second. He stalked into his brother’s space. “So this is entirely altruistic, is it?”

“No. I can’t lie. I want the credit for taking you there and back. I want the King’s thanks and I want to see the Shadow dimension for myself. But it doesn’t negate the fact that you *do* still need me to do it for you.”

Those reasons made more sense. Dragon was always out for number one. Hawk nodded. He supposed it was a fair deal. Dragon would get them there, he could save Hadley, and Dragon could get whatever experience he needed out of this too.

“Then let’s do it.”

“Wait.” His mother’s voice filled the room. “You don’t know about the Shadow dimension. Or at least, you shouldn’t know about it.” The last was said with a glare at Dragon who, surprisingly, looked down at the floor.

“Mother, we are running out of time. I need you to stay here and take care of Hadley’s body. She may start to show flu-like symptoms. It is imperative that you not let her body die.”

Leopard nodded. “I will not fail in this, but you must hear me out. I was but a small child when we saw the Shadow People, regularly. They are a dimension filled with males. It has been over a century since any of them have been able to produce a female child. They came to the King, the father of our current ruler, and requested the right to mate with our women. The idea was to continue to produce males to work the mines in Shadow Land, to build their ships for above-ground travel, and, in other words, keep their dimension running despite the lack of women. The King scoffed. He wasn’t giving us

over to be broodmares to the Shadow People. He banned them from Haven and had the Mystics ward our barriers so they couldn't cross again."

"Let me be clear about this, just so I'm sure I understand, all shadows are men? Even the ones that are of women. Your shadow is actually a man?"

Leopard shook her head but Dragon interrupted. "The shadows that you're thinking of are not the Shadow People. The shadows on the wall are just bent light casting images of you on the wall or the floor or wherever. These are people from an entirely different dimension and when they come here they look like shadows."

Well, at least that made sense. As much as anything did when one was trying to figure out the intricate details of dimensional travel. It didn't matter. He had one objective and that was to get to Hadley and bring her home while there was still time. If there were Shadow men waiting for him when he got there, then he'd dispose of them like he would any other threat. If they could feel, they could bleed. If they could bleed, they could die.

He gathered his family in a circle. Dragon pulled a small silver object out of his pocket. Hawk smiled; he hadn't seen one of the Mystical amulets since he was a child and his parents had taken Dragon to Astor to leave him with the practitioners there. Merchants had tried to sell his father a few when they'd passed a Mystical shop. They were supposed to bring good luck.

"Worried about our odds?"

Dragon scoffed. "Only the simplest of Mystics use them for luck charms. Mine is a bit more complicated."

Closing his eyes, Dragon muttered some words Hawk couldn't understand. When he opened his lids again, his brother's eyes had turned an even darker shade of black. "Open." He waved one hand and a visible slice formed in the air around them. Gradually, the slice got wider until it was a giant hole large enough to step through. A smile crept on his brother's face. "After you."

Without hesitation, Hawk stepped into the opening, confident that his men would follow and if, for some unknown reason, they didn't, then he knew he would still get there and find a way to rescue Hadley.

Pitch-blackness filled his vision, surrounding him like a warm cloak. Hawk continued to move forward; he didn't need to see, only to move. He pulled his sword from its sheath. You never knew what would present itself on the other side of a portal.

A blinding white light assaulted him and Hawk felt himself falling. He landed with a thud and rolled to his feet jumping up, sword still in hand. His attention focused on the sight in front of him, so he heard rather than saw the others arrive. Each made a similar thumping sound with the exception who, he assumed, was Dragon. His brother's landing sounded even less graceful.

They had come down in some kind of open field. Half-dead trees with branches dragging towards the ground scattered in front of his vision. One lone vulture prowled the cloudless black sky. He knew it had to be daytime or there would be no way he could see as well as he did. In this dimension, daytime sky was darkness.

He resheathed his sword. At the end of the field, an opening to a cave stood ominous and unsecured. A partially collapsed boulder obscured half of the rock entrance. Loud mechanical screeches and men's shouts were audible from inside. These must be the mines he'd heard his mother mention. Did they have Hadley inside?

An alarm bell rang out into the field and Dragon grabbed Hawk's arm. "It looks like our entrance was not unnoticed. We should run."

"Retreat will get us nowhere. You are too important to lose; no one will be able to return without you. Hide yourself."

"I am not *a coward*." Dragon's fists clenched at his sides.

Hawk reached out and grabbed his brother's arm. "I know that. Please, we cannot afford to risk you. Anyone else can be replaced but not you."

Dragon's eyes flared for a moment before he half nodded. Spinning in a circle, Dragon transformed into a small version of his namesake and took to the sky. He breathed a stream of fire in Hawk's direction before flying higher and landing in a branch of one of the dead trees.

Was there no limit to what his brother could do? Hawk shook his head.

Seconds later, the yells of charging men filled his ears. He smiled. There was no fighting force equal to that of the Haven Warriors. Even if they were hugely outnumbered, they would still win. That much he was sure of. Before this hour was over one of those poor doomed souls with the misfortune to match swords with him would be the one to tell him where they held his woman.

Hawk counted thirty men. Nodding his head, he pointed left and right. His men spread out into their standard fight formation. This wouldn't take very much effort. "Swords up." He waited a beat for his men to comply. "Eliminate."

Three men reached Hawk first and Hawk swung around, gashing two in their middles as he engaged the third. The man had some skill in a fight but not much, and with two right thrusts, Hawk had disarmed him. He lay crumpled on the ground with his compatriots.

Hawk turned, scanning the grounds. His men had their opponents easily in hand. Stone hadn't quite disposed of his. Hawk stormed forward and picked the man up from where he cowered.

"My name is Hawk. I am from a place called Haven."

"I know of such a place." The other man's voice shook and Hawk suspected he spoke at least two octaves higher than he normally did.

"You have my woman."

"Oh sir, you are wrong, I have no woman. I have not earned one yet. I cannot pay the grabbers to go and get one for me."

Hawk sighed. "What is your name?"

"Bistronus, sir." Hawk found he was having a hard time telling one Shadow man from another. They were all extremely tall, with long dark hair. Similar to his own description, he supposed.

"Okay, Bistronus, I did not mean that *you* specifically had my woman. Although if you did, it would be very convenient. What I meant was that the Shadow people have my woman and I want her back."

Fury started in his stomach and threatened to explode. Acidic bile churned and made him angry. He hadn't been this upset since he'd first found out on earth that he and his men could not get to Zamara. If there was one thing Hawk could not tolerate it was ineffectualness and he'd been feeling that way for far too long.

"So where do you suppose I would find her?"

"Well," Bistronus cleared his throat. "If she just got here, then I suppose they

wouldn't have time to judge her unworthy and send her to the mines. She *did* just arrive?"

Hawk nodded. "That's correct." This conversation took way longer than he would have liked.

"Then she's with the other females in the women's area about five kilometers from here."

"An easy distance, my prince." Stone's voice behind was filled with happiness.

"It is indeed." He turned his attention to Bistronus. "Did you say there are women trapped down in those mines?" Women who, like the Pettigrew girls, had been taken from their homes and brought to this dimension that could not support its own female life.

"If they won't be amenable to mating, we have to give them some purpose. They might as well work for us and make themselves useful."

Without turning around, Hawk made a quick decision. "Storm, take Donovan and Panther and go get the women out of those mines."

Three grunts asserted their compliance as they ran towards the nearly destroyed cave entrance.

Dragon's dramatic snort told Hawk he had returned to his human form since the fighting had ceased. "Might I remind you, *my prince*, that we have nothing to do with those women? They have no bodies to be returned to."

"Surely, a man with your superior Mystical powers will not be daunted by the mere problem of creating them bodies, Dragon. Now, Bistronus, you are going to take me to the women's area and *if* you're very obedient and very helpful, I will let you live."

"I'll be as good as you want me to be. I'm just a miner."

Hawk pushed him forward. "Don't suspect for one second that I care who or what you are. This entire dimension can burn to the ground for all I care. I am here for Hadley and everyone else can go to hell."

"So you expect me to find a way to give these lost women bodies?" Dragon's voice hissed in his ear.

"Frankly it never occurred to me that you couldn't do it."

"Why don't you just ask me to raise the dead?"

Hawk shrugged. "Why don't you?"

"Because there are some things that are just not done." Dragon kicked a rock in front of them.

"Like studying from a man who should have died two centuries ago and who was banned from our homeland. Or am I thinking too linearly again?"

Dragon stopped walking. "I didn't mean to imply you were stupid."

"That's exactly what you meant." Hawk pulled him up by his shirt. "I'm only going to say this once because we don't have time. You weren't the only one destroyed by what happened to you in our childhood. You were my big brother. I worshiped you and I've lived guilt-ridden my whole damn life because I was born with abilities you don't have. Seems to me you have plenty of your own. But right now everything has to be about Hadley. You chose to come on this journey. Stop bitching."

"Sir," Bistronus caught his attention. "We have arrived."

The countryside had altered slightly during their walk. Flatter with slightly more living vegetation, Hawk saw what looked like a makeshift military operation filled with

large green tents that looked like they had seen better days.

“Spread out, open every tent until you find her. Collect the other women. If they want to leave, take them with us. My extraordinarily talented brother is going to find a way to save all of them.”

Hawk crossed to the first tent he reached. Sword drawn in case of danger, he stepped into the tent and came face-to-face with someone he’d never thought to see again. He sucked in his breath. Hadley was nowhere to be found, but standing in front of him, alive and well, was Annabelle.

“Hello, Hawk. I’ve been expecting you.”

Chapter Seventeen

Had she slept at all? She must have because when she'd woken up, she'd not been where she fell asleep. It had taken her ten minutes to figure that out and now after another five she was still not prepared for what she next learned. The Shadow King had stolen her. He paced the room of what she assumed was his palace.

He finally stopped his endless walking and turned to face her. His skin, pale like the whitest snow, held a slight flush in his cheeks that she imagined was from the exertion it must have taken to teleport himself into her tent, grab her, and transport out. Other than informing her he was the Shadow King and he'd teleported her here to his palace, he hadn't said anything else.

Tired of being stared at, she finally spoke. "Why am I here? Have you 'claimed' me?"

Her sisters hadn't told her exactly how that worked, so she supposed this could be the protocol. He pulled his long blonde hair from its ponytail holder, pulling on the long strands in nervousness. He was the only man she'd seen here who wasn't as dark as midnight.

"I am not claiming you. Although if I thought it would solve my problem, I would do so in a minute."

"You have a problem?" She was having a whole bunch of them herself. If she didn't believe in self-preservation and the hope that she'd once again get to see Hawk, she'd let him know *just* how she felt about his adding to the ever growing long list of issues.

"My people are being attacked, my mines are being raided, and my women are being taken from me. All of this is because *of you*." He shouted the last two words which might have previously made her cringe. But since she'd gotten so good lately at handling Hawk's bad moods, she didn't find it to be that difficult to endure. Men screamed, they ranted and raved, but she didn't have to respond to it.

"Excuse me, your Shadow majesty, but I don't see how any of this could possibly be my fault. I didn't *ask* to be brought here against my will, dragged around, or threatened. Not to mention I couldn't even begin to figure out how the fact that people are being attacked could have anything to do with me."

"Does the name Hawk mean anything to you?"

Hadley's heart skipped a beat. "Should it?" She wasn't going to give this man any information about Hawk. Nothing that might compromise him.

The Shadow King bent over until his face practically touched hers. "Oh, I think it should. I just finished communicating with your father and he tells me you are quite familiar with Hawk. So I can only assume he is here with thirteen Haven Warriors because of you."

"There are some words *I'd* like to have with my father too."

"You still have not answered my question."

Hadley raised an eyebrow. "Do I know Hawk?"

"Yes, woman, that question."

"Well, I suppose if my father says I know him, then I must know him."

"You aren't going to help me at all, are you?"

“*Ooh! You’re a bright one!*”

The King picked her up and shoved her against the wall. His hands pressed hard into her arms and she cried out. “Is that supposed to be sarcasm?”

“I suppose so. Is this supposed to be frightening?” Her words were strained as the pain in her arms worsened.

“If I wanted to, I could keep you here until your body on Haven dies. It won’t take much longer. Soon you’ll be nothing but a rotten corpse like your sisters.” His pupils were huge, and Hadley had to admit she was scared. But she’d be damned if she let him know. She squirmed and tried to pull out of his clutches but he was too strong. “Stop struggling.”

“No.” If Hawk was somewhere in this dimension, he’d find her. She’d never saw herself as needing someone to get her out of tough situations but right at this moment, she would gladly take rescue.

“I can see it in your eyes that you still have hope. That is a dangerous thing. Very few people in your position would have dared to still hold onto such a ridiculous notion.”

Hadley shook her head. “Is it? It seems to me you must want something from me. You’ve gone to a great deal of trouble to bring me here to your castle. Why don’t you tell me what you really need from me and I’ll decide if I feel like negotiating with you.” She took a big chance, if she was wrong she was in more trouble than she cared to admit.

With a plop, she collided with the floor as he dropped her. “You’re right. I do want something from you.” His eyes traced her body and she shivered with dread. That wasn’t what she’d expected him to desire. He smiled, a glint of satisfaction in his eyes.

“Tempting, but I’m afraid I have more pressing matters.” He crossed the room to a tall, black desk and opened the top left drawer. Pulling out a small vial, he closed the drawer and shut the top of the desk so that it now resembled a giant safe. Obviously, whatever he kept in there he didn’t want people getting to.

Stomping his feet, he walked to where she sat on the floor. He towered over her but she wouldn’t blink or flinch from his hard gaze.

“In this small vial, I have something called *Breathless*.”

“I don’t want endless life,” Hadley spat.

“Not like father, like daughter, eh?” The King laughed, a hard, cold, sound. “I actually didn’t think so. *Breathless*, if consumed daily, will keep you alive as long as you drink it every day. But the second you stop taking it, normal aging begins again. On Haven, your body is in rapid decline. Even now I can see Leopard working constantly to keep down a fever from an infection she cannot find. Eventually, she will lose her battle. Everyone does.”

“You have the gift of Sight.” It wasn’t a question. The man could obviously see things beyond what happened around him.

“Only to those who are members of my Kingdom.”

Hadley shot to her feet. “*I am not a member of your Kingdom.*”

“You were given to us when you were born in return for thirty years worth of *Breathless*.”

“I wasn’t available to be given, nor were my sisters.” Hadley blinked rapidly. She couldn’t remember ever being so angry, but she needed to keep her control.

The King raised an eyebrow. “I rather agree.” He did? “But that doesn’t mean I didn’t take them—and you—anyway because desperation has caused me to do things I

would not do otherwise.”

Hadley swallowed, her mouth felt dry. “And what makes you desperate?”

“My people are dying. We haven’t produced a female of our own in two centuries. A terrible virus, nothing more than a flu, overwhelmed us. Everyone got sick. When the fever had cleared, all the women were dead. Since then, even mating with off-worlders, we have not been able to have female children of our own. The men grow more withdrawn, less civilized as time goes on. They spend increasing amounts of time in the mines going deeper into the grounds where we never explored and I fear for what they will find there.”

Hadley couldn’t help but be moved by what he said. Whatever else he was, on this, he was sincere. A lump formed in her throat. “Your majesty…”

He laughed, the same humorless sound. “Leon. My name is Leon. As you have pointed out, you are not actually my subject.”

“Leon, tell me what it is that I can do for you? I feel pain for your plight but I’m just a woman, raised on Earth, who recently found out I am actually something quite different than I imagined. I’m ill-equipped for any of this.”

“You’re a healer, as your mother is a healer. I cannot get to her; she is blocked by some sort of unbreakable wall and your sisters are pale comparisons. Each one of them might have metaphysical talent if trained but I have neither the time nor the resources to devote to that. But you, when I look towards you in my third-eye, I see what you already can do and have done on Haven.” He pounded on the wall with his fist. “Do it here. *Heal us.*”

Hadley paced to the window where Leon stood so she could have eye contact with him. “It’s not that I don’t care for your problems, I do.”

“But?”

“I cannot travel from dimension to dimension fixing the problems of the world *and I will not be used as a pawn.*” She sighed. “I’d rather be dead.”

“Which is what you will be if I don’t let you have one sip of this,” he held up the vial. “A day. Just one sip.”

Hadley’s arms tingled. This close to Leon, and not being physically threatened, her newfound abilities surged through her with a desire to heal his wounds, especially the emotional ones. Who might he have been if he’d been dealt different cards?

Hawk’s words traveled back to her. She wasn’t to try to heal the emotional baggage of everyone she came into contact with. It was too risky a problem.

“If I’m supposed to die then I will die.” Wow, in her life she’d never felt so fatalistic.

“And are you prepared to die like this? Your body is put in the ground and yet here you remain, broodmare to the most disgusting, repulsive Shadow man I can find for you?”

Turning her head slightly to the left, she examined his hard profile. Another woman would call him handsome, but all she could see were the currents of misery that filled his days and tainted his soul. “Your burdens have killed off any kindness you ever had, haven’t they?”

“Long ago, I learned to distinguish between ends and means. I will do whatever I have to do to whomever I have to do them to. Especially you.”

Hadley threw her hands in the hair. “There is nothing I can do for you. I can’t control my gift, it nearly kills me every time I use it and it’s usually more of a subconscious thing

anyway.”

“I can’t get to Hawk. I’m afraid he would best me if I tried, but I can hurt him, more than you can imagine. He’s already lost Annabelle—unless of course he’s found her again.” Hadley tried not to flinch as the image of Annabelle and Hawk lost in each other’s embrace filled her with aching loneliness. “I can’t fathom the pain he would feel to fail again, to lose you, which is what will happen if you don’t drink your Breathless.”

“And the only way you’ll give me the drug is if I heal your people. All of you?” He nodded and she swallowed hard. She wasn’t ready to give up on Hawk. Just hours earlier she’d thought to sacrifice her happiness for Annabelle’s, but now something had shifted inside of her. He was hers. Right or wrong, she would fight for him.

To do that she would have to live. Hawk had traveled here with an army to rescue her, the least she could do would be to not give up hope and to fight for both of them.

“What if I can’t do it? If I try, and I’m unable to succeed?”

“If you fail, there will be no Breathless.”

Hadley groaned. “So I won’t even get it for good measure?”

“If you fail, two-thirds of my people will be dead with no hope of renewal. I will accept nothing from you but absolute success.”

“You don’t think you’re being a little unfair here?”

Leon shrugged. “I know I’m being unfair.”

“If I agree to this, what assurances do I have that you will keep your word?”

Leon face split an angry grin. “You think because I am a creature of the shadows, I am not to be trusted?”

Now he’d pissed her off. “Don’t you dare treat me like I’m some kind of bigot. You’ve done nothing but abuse me for days. And now you want me to just accept your word as if you actually have some honor.”

She realized she was shouting but she wanted some kind of reassurance or she would halt this all right now and find another way out of this mess. Not that any ideas presented themselves to her at the moment.

“Contract.”

Hadley was confused—what had he just meant? One moment later, a paper appeared before her eyes. It floated in the air in front of her. She reached out and grabbed it.

“This is a contract with my soul attached to it. As soon as you’ve looked at it, I will send it to the Shadow People Hall of Chambers. There it will be filed. If I do not live up to my end of the bargain, this contract will activate and I will be sent immediately from here to the pits of the mines of Brenta where I will remain the rest of my days, soulless and alone.”

Well, that sounded fair. Hadley nodded and passed the contract to him. He seemed to blink and the paper vanished presumably sent to the so-called Hall of Chambers.

“I’m going to do this. I have one request.”

He raised an eyebrow. “A request?”

“Whenever I’ve tried to do this in the past, or rather whenever it has happened to me without my consent, I’ve nearly died from it. This is larger than anything I’ve done thus far. Please, if I die, tell Hawk that I loved him. I never said it when we were together. I felt like everything was too soon, too fast, and I doubted myself... But I know that I do love him ... and I want him to know it too.”

One tear slipped from her eye and she wiped it away. It was the only tear she would

shed.

She walked to the window and pressed both palms against it. Having no idea if she was doing any of this right, but going on instinct alone, she closed her eyes and let her mind wander.

At first, nothing happened and she blew out an exasperated breath. She didn't wonder where Leon was; she could still feel his presence on the other side of the room. Hawk. She wanted it to be Hawk standing there, supporting her as she undertook this way-too-large experience.

Thinking of him gave her a feeling of strength. Her arms and legs started to tingle. She could feel the sickness that still lived inside of these people. It had killed the women and slowly but surely it was destroying the men.

Leon had been right. She could fix this and now that she knew it, she had to do it. Call it a compulsion; she knew she had no choice. They needed her. She fell to her knees and pushed her power outward. Whoever needed it could have it; after all, it was hers to give.

Chapter Eighteen

It hadn't even occurred to him that he would see her. Obviously, it should have once he'd heard about the Shadow People and their role in this mess. Annabelle, as alive as he was, standing in front of him, looking a lot less surprised to see him than he was to see her.

He reached out and cupped the side of her face just to make sure she was real and not some advanced state of delusion brought on by too much dimensional travel. She grinned but took a step back out of his reach.

"How are you, Hawk?"

The way she said his name made his stomach clench. Annabelle had never been able to pronounce the aw in his name without it sounding nasally. In any one else it would have driven him crazy, but in her he had found it endearing.

"I'm very surprised to see you. Glad that you are alive. I'm really not sure what to say. As Hadley would put it, I'm not sure what the protocol for this is." His heart wrenched as he spoke of Hadley.

"Ah." Annabelle nodded her head. "Then it is as I suspected and you two are in love."

Two things surprised Hawk about that last sentence. The first was that the guilt he would have guessed he would have felt at those words did not surface, and the second was that Annabelle didn't sound at all accusatory or upset by her statement.

"How did you know?" There was no point in sugar-coating it or trying to spare her feelings. This Annabelle he didn't know. Poised, she stood a distance from him as if they were old friends running into each other at the park instead of lovers wrenched apart by death and dimensional distance.

"Once I realized she knew you, I recognized right away that you were her type. She was sure she'd find a way out of here. Even though it was remote, it occurred to me that she must have something to get back to that was very important. I'm glad to see my suspicions were not untrue and that you are in love with each other." She paused, turning her head to the side. "Also, she turned three shades whiter when she met me—like a kid caught with her hand in the cookie jar."

Hawk's heart raced and he noticed he was covered in a cool sweat. He really needed to find Hadley. "Do you know where she is?"

Annabelle shrugged, crossing to the center of the room to fold what looked like very bare and basic sleeping equipment. "I imagine she is wherever she is meant to be."

Hawk felt like his eyes might cross from that answer. "What does that mean, Annabelle?"

"It means that when answers are not forthcoming, one has to make do with accepting the unknowable."

This wasn't the Annabelle he had known. She certainly hadn't been spouting out nonsense guised in spiritual rhetoric or he would have been done with her before they'd ever gotten started.

He moved to her and grabbed her arm. She felt cold to his touch, like chicken when you first pulled it out of the refrigerator before you'd warmed it up. The sensation was

disconcerting and he dropped her arm.

She smiled and patted him on the shoulder. “It doesn’t feel like real skin, right? That’s because it’s not. It’s just clothing created with metaphysics. My body died on earth, this is just a manifestation of something the Shadow King created so I could breed, cook, and clean for the man who claimed me.”

Hawk swallowed hard. “And have you bred?” It was a disgusting way to think of procreation and even though this new Annabelle was not the woman he’d loved, he hated to think of her having to endure that type of fate.

She nodded. “Once. His name is Matthew. They took my son ten years ago. He would be grown now, I fear I might not recognize him if I saw him on the street. Through various sources, I am told he trained to build sailing ships and now he is the chief apprentice to the top ship builder in the land. It’s rather impressive; his father was a low level miner. I haven’t seen him in years.”

This whole place was so screwed up it now rivaled Earth for its inconsistencies and problems. In fact, it was probably worse. Haven had troubles, but parents were not forcibly separated from their children.

He wasn’t going to ask Annabelle how many times she’d been forced to ‘breed’ before she’d actually conceived. That sort of discussion would fall under way too much information about her personal business. Besides, he still had to find Hadley—that was first and foremost—and fixing this business for Annabelle had to come second.

Hadley still had a warm body back on Haven that she could be restored to.

A shout behind him garnered his attention and Dragon plowed into the room. “We have company.”

Unsheathing his sword, Hawk ran out of the tent prepared to fight and wanting to lead the action away from the women. His men stormed out of the tents they had searched, each as alert to the noises outside as he had been.

He nodded right and left and they spread out into attack formation. Their soon-to-be opponents needed a lesson in stealth. They made enough of a racket to wake the dead. Hawk quickly assessed them.

They held their swords sloppily but at least they had them, unlike the poor wretches he and his men had eliminated at the mine. A few of the group limped behind the others and Hawk rolled his eyes. There was nothing more distressing than doing battle against an enemy made up of untrained youth, old men, and the infirm. Was *this* all that was left of the Shadow People?

Why didn’t the King send better enforcements than this? Or were they all out stealing innocent women and forcing them to mate?

The thought brought much needed fury to his blood.

“Make it quick, gentlemen.” Hawk gave his order loudly; he wanted the approaching attack to hear his confidence. Half of winning a battle was mentally psyching out the enemy. In previous encounters, it had taken a lot more than boasting, but Hawk supposed with this group it wouldn’t take much.

“Halt.” Dragon grabbed his arm.

“What?”

“Something is happening. Can’t you feel it?”

Hawk had never been particularly attuned to his psychic nature, but he closed his eyes and tried for one second to feel what was so important that his brother had stopped

his attack.

There was a ripple in the air, but he wasn't trained enough to know what it meant. He opened his eyes.

"What is it?"

Dragon's eyes were huge, his pupils dilated. "I have no idea. I've never felt anything like this before in my life and I don't mind telling you, little brother, that scares the hell out of me."

A surge of energy knocked Hawk onto his back. He felt paralyzed, his limbs wouldn't cooperate. He knew this feeling; he'd experienced it once before when Hadley had healed the knife wound Dragon inflicted on him. It had to be her. What in all of the dimensions was she doing?

The energy that flowed over them was overpowering, all consuming. It forced his eyes closed. Memories long forgotten flooded to the surface. He saw himself as a child, standing in front of his father as the patriarch of the family had taught him discipline with the crack of a whip.

His mother's worn face when, after weeks on her own, she'd shown the slightest hint of weakness from not knowing where her husband had been for months at a time or if he was still alive and returning to them.

Dragon's eyes rimmed in red, lines of fear stark in his face as he'd stared bravely at his parents while they turned their back to leave him in Astor. His gaze moving to Hawk's with accusatory daggers, blaming him for having the audacity to be born a Warrior. His twelve-year-old self knowing that when next he saw his brother things would never be the same.

The life-draining feeling that death after death and failure after failure experienced during his years on Earth had all but destroyed him, until Hadley had looked up at him from under her glasses and thanked him for bringing them to her despite her fear of him. Two seconds later, she had called him a pirate and restarted the heart he thought ceased long ago to beat.

Hawk wrenched his eyes open. He had told her to stay out of his emotional baggage. It was too much for her to take on and he wouldn't have her harmed in any way. Using every bit of force he could muster, he pulled his head up to look around. Everyone was either doubled over or flat on their backs.

He didn't know how Hadley was doing this but he was sure it had to be killing her. Annabelle stumbled out of the tent, shrieking like a banshee.

Her skin, the color of a tomato, pulsed. He couldn't touch her, but Hawk would have bet anything that her outsides would no longer feel cold. The same surge of energy that had brought up his old memories and banished the negativity contained in them had given Annabelle back her live body. It appeared that live tissue was reanimating Annabelle's previously dull shell.

All of this made sense, Hadley could heal. It was what she did, and somehow she was fixing the entire dimension. He couldn't let this continue.

If Annabelle could walk around, so could he. He pulled himself to his knees. Crawling like a baby, he made his way to Dragon. His brother writhed on the ground, his hands on his face.

"Dragon." Hawk shook him twice. "This is Hadley, this is what she does. Get hold of yourself."

Dragon moaned. "How can she have this much power?"

"You said it yourself. She is the most powerful person born of our realm in a thousand years. Get yourself together. I need you to track the energy."

"Track the energy, yes, that sounds like a smart idea."

Hawk rolled his eyes. "Can you do it?"

"If you help me up."

After he'd gotten Dragon to a sitting position, his brother shook his head to clear it like a wet dog. "I need to concentrate."

"So concentrate."

Dragon glared at him and Hawk tried not to smile. In that one look, he had seemed more lucid. One thing he could count on, Dragon would always get it together to be angry with him no matter what the circumstances were.

"I've got the direction." His voice was two octaves lower. "That way." Dragon pointed to the sky in an easterly direction.

"We need to get there." Hawk silently wished he had his mutated powers back and he could have just levitated and gone after her.

"I think I can help with that."

Dragon blinked twice and changed into an actual giant lizard. Hawk smiled. It was a good thing he hadn't argued about his older brother accompanying them. Turned out he couldn't have done any of this without him.

Hawk climbed on top of him. He really did feel like a lizard. How far did this changing go? Did his brother still think like a person or was he now deducing things like an animal? Come to think of it, what was the level of intelligence on a dragon? Truthfully, Hawk had no idea.

The flight was bumpy, not smooth like it would have been on one of his birds. It was also possible that Dragon was just not that good at flying. Hawk shrugged. As long as it got him to Hadley, he would take as much jostling as need be.

A black cloud surrounded them and rain poured down on his head. Where had this weather come from? As they moved forward, the rain got worse until lightning bore down on them.

There was no way any of this was natural. They must be getting close. Someone didn't want them getting to Hadley, which only made Hawk feel more determined. He looked down on his brother, who was getting just as fatigued as he was, if not more.

Dragon wasn't in love with Hadley. It was possible his brother wasn't as dedicated to this rescue mission as he was. He wished they could talk so Hawk could convince him into staying course. Looking down at the giant flying lizard that he shared DNA with changed his mind. Eyes squinted, he saw his own feelings reflected back at him. His brother was not a coward and he would not be turning back now.

Hawk took a deep breath. There wasn't an act of nature that would keep Hawk from Hadley. Lightning struck and Dragon jerked quickly to the right to avoid being hit. Hawk held on tight but nearly fell off. Dragon roared.

The deafening crack of thunder rang his ears. Whoever was doing this to them was a dead man.

The clouds abruptly cleared and looming in the horizon was a dark blue castle. At some point, it must have been beautiful and majestic, but now it was decrepit and dead looking. Hawk had no doubt that was where Hadley was being held.

A white cloud of mist formed around the outside of the building and with a blinding yellow light it changed in front of his eyes. The blue stones lost their worn look and glowed as though they were brand new.

“Dragon, if you can hear me in there, she’s fixing the landscape. I hope we’re not too late.”

Fire spat from his brother’s mouth, burning orange in the night sky.

He would not fail Hadley. She was his life and he would reclaim her. Anyone who got in his way would regret it.

Chapter Nineteen

Hadley heaved into the toilet, but she had long ago emptied the contents of her stomach.

Come to me Hadley.

The squid wanted her attention, had desired it for hours but Hadley had no idea how to stop what was happening and no clue how to answer the squid if she wasn't asleep. So for the moment she continued to make friends with the porcelain bowl below her.

She wiped her mouth and sat up. Leon paced back and forth from the window to the table. His hair glowed like the midday sun and his eyes sparkled as if they had been cut out of amethysts. She'd never liked blond men, but he was going to make some woman—claimed or otherwise—very happy.

"It's enough. I've been telling you for hours that it's enough. Stop this now."

A wave of dizziness swept through her and she hit the wooden floor below her. Her ears rang. When she could raise her head, she glared at Leon. "Don't you think that if I could stop this, I would? Does it look like I'm having a good time here? I warned you this would happen. Ends and means remember? Someone else said something similar to me once and he ended up feeling bad about it too. So save your remorse, because if I love him and I'm *still* pissed about what he did, then I'm likely never to forgive you."

He crossed to her. "Ms. Pettigrew, you must believe..."

"Oh, I'm Ms. Pettigrew now am I? It's *Dr.* Pettigrew. Why do I feel like I've had this conversation before?" She laughed as another wave of nausea hit her. Instead of going back to her previously disgusting position, she closed her eyes and hoped beyond hope that if she just lay there long enough it would cease.

Moments later it did.

She shook her head and raised her hand. "Help me up, your Highness or Leon or whatever I'm supposed to call you. I have a fever, I can barely move, and I want to lie down. Do you have a bed or a couch or a couple of pillows I can use?"

"Bed is this way." Leon picked her up and carried her as if she was a baby to the nearest bedroom, which proved to be not very close at all. After ten minutes of walking, she was finally placed down on comfortable cotton sheets in a dark and sparsely decorated guest room.

"In my mother's lifetime, we had servants and staff here who could have helped you. I'm afraid we long since stopped caring about such things. You're stuck with me."

The small amount of light that illuminated the room seemed like too much. She squinted and raised her hand above her eyes to block some of it out. "You remember your promise, don't you Leon?"

"To tell Hawk. Yes, I recall, and I won't fail to deliver your message although you may get your chance. Your brave boyfriend has been attempting with aid of a seriously pissed off dragon to get through the castle defenses for half an hour. He may succeed shortly."

"Couldn't you just let him in?" Why did everything have to be a struggle?

"No. I am not going to let a raving lunatic of a Haven Warrior into my castle on purpose, even if you do *claim* to love him."

Another wave of energy was going to spew out of her. She knew the symptoms now: her temperature rose, she started to sweat, and just when she thought she was dead, the energy left her body with such a force that she either seized or vomited. Personally, she preferred the latter but the first option had been the most common.

"I don't like the way you said claim. What does that mean?"

Leon sat down on the end of the bed. "I mean," he reached out and grabbed her hand. "That sometimes fate puts someone in front of us for a reason. Maybe you've saved us all because you're meant to be my queen."

"I am not anyone's savior so don't put that on me. I am a woman who has been given certain abilities and I'm happy to use them if I can, although this time I'll admit, I'd love for them to stop. You would think there would be an automatic shut-off or something." At his quizzical look, she groaned. She wasn't even going to try to explain what that meant to him. If Haven was post-technological, Shadow Land looked like it had never had any. All metaphysics and no elemental science for these people. "And I am not your queen. I don't even really like you, not at all."

He raised an eyebrow. "You're blunt, aren't you?"

"And you're blond. Why is that? Every shadow person I've encountered is as dark as nighttime and you practically glow with sunlight."

"I believe the word is albino, yes? My family has been this way for generations. It's part of why my people believe we hold the most Mystical talent."

"And don't you?"

He smiled. "No, Hadley, I believe you hold the most Mystical talent."

"I'll tell you again, Leon, I'm not one of your people."

Just then the energy inside of her heated up, leaving her feeling like she might erupt. She screamed aloud, cursing in every language she knew. Her head moved side to side on the pillow. This was the worst it had been. This time she wasn't going to make it, she was sure to explode.

A cool washcloth brushed her face. "I'm so sorry Hadley Pettigrew."

"Ah." Her body ached and she arched off the bed uncontrollably. She gritted her teeth as her body began to shake.

Afraid she would never have a chance to say anything again, she grabbed Leon's shirt. "No remorse, just make it right. Finish what I started. Your people are fixed. Send the women home."

A feeling of floating overcame her. Everything seemed foggy. As if she watched an old movie, she seemed to be seeing things in black and white. She blinked a couple of times and sat up. She wasn't in bed anymore and Leon was nowhere to be found.

Had she died? She'd been afraid she was about to. Standing up, she almost slipped when something brushed up against her feet. Looking down, she realized she stood in a small lake although she didn't feel wet. Once again, something rubbed against her feet and this time she shrieked.

She had no idea what was in the water, it could be some kind of eel or a shark or a leech in there getting ready to eat her. Not sure where she got the energy she sprinted away from whatever was on the ground, although she had no idea where she ran because she couldn't see anything beyond mist and clouds in the black and white haze.

Don't worry, Hadley, it's just me.

Putting her hand on her chest, Hadley felt herself sputter. "So, I'm asleep, okay, now

this is making sense.”

You're not asleep.

“Then we’re back to me having no idea what the hell is going on.” She snickered; it had been a long day, and if she didn’t laugh she would cry.

You're in a dimension we call the Cloud's dimension. It doesn't seem to support any life. We come here for peace and quiet, but I couldn't get what was happening to you out of my mind so I've brought you here temporarily.

Hadley swallowed. “Am I about to die?”

Most likely but these things are never as clear as I would like them to be. Your kind has a remarkable way of pulling through, although I'd say at the moment things are not looking up for you.

“Thanks for the honesty, I suppose.” She sat down in the water, uncaring that she got wet—what difference did it make anyway? She sighed as an image of Hawk filled her mind. He’d been trying to get to her. Had he made it? She would never get to tell him herself so she hoped beyond reason that Leon lived up to his word and told Hawk how much she loved him.

It still burned her insides that she’d never get the chance to fight for him, to prove to him that she was his destiny and not Annabelle.

We all agree that it would be awful for you to die here. You were meant to be the savior of not one but two worlds.

“I am not and stop saying that, you’re going to give me a complex.”

What did you want if you don't want to be the reason two worlds get to continue?

“I wanted to see you, to find you on my science vessel.”

You would never have found us on your little boat.

Hadley slammed her hands down in the water and watched as little splashes rippled throughout the lake. “Some people do, you know. There have been some scientists to see you or find you, even on Earth.”

Terrible tragic mistakes, nothing more.

Hadley snorted. “Sure.” She paused. What else did she want? Well, that was easy, she wanted Hawk but what did that even mean? Could she be his wife? Was there a way that was even possible?

You think of your man, Hawk.

“I am. I think of him all the time. I can’t seem to help myself.” She stood up. “What happens after we die?”

What makes you think I would know an answer like that?

“Wishful thinking? All right, enough of this, whatever is about to happen, let’s let it happen. No more playing around. I can’t hide from this.”

As you wish.

Hadley sat up in bed. Leon was shoved up against the wall; Hawk had a dagger against his neck. “If she dies, you die too. If she lives, you may die anyway.”

“Hawk.” Her voice sounded like a croak and she shivered uncontrollably. Evidently waking up did not constitute being out of trouble.

Hawk turned his head to the sound of her voice. He threw Leon into the chair next to the bed. “Don’t move. There is nowhere you can go that I won’t hunt you.”

In two strides, he reached her side and knelt down next to her. “Hadley, you have to stop this, it’s killing you. I don’t know what happens to you if you die here. Your body is

still on Haven.”

She tried to smile. “I get the impression I’m a dead woman either way.”

Hawk roared and she shivered from the sound. She knew she loved him, but she’d been unclear as to his exact feelings. In that one noise, she knew everything he felt. Reaching up, she stroked his cheek.

“Don’t kill Leon. He’s king here, I can’t imagine that responsibility.”

“He’s nearly destroyed you for his own gain.”

Hadley raised an eyebrow and Hawk looked down at the floor. “I’m no better, am I?”

“For a while, it seemed everyone used me for what they wanted, but ultimately I made my own choices. I wanted to get off that boat, find a way to save Hailey and myself from death at the age of thirty, and I did that. Leon has tried seemingly forever to save his people from destruction. I couldn’t stand the thought of them dying out and I couldn’t allow any other women to be taken against their will. I wanted to help.” Hadley coughed violently and when the wracking finally eased up, she looked down at her hand to find it covered with blood. Her eyes met Hawk’s and she saw reflected in his what she already knew: that was *not* a good sign.

“Dragon.” Hawk’s voice was no more than a hiss. “Fix this.”

Hadley hadn’t even been aware Dragon was in the room. She blinked and she stood in front of her. She expected to see intrigue and intellectual interest shown in his eyes but instead she was horrified to see sadness and regret.

“This is beyond my powers, Hawk.”

“No.” Hawk pounded his fist on the bed. “She saved all those women, this entire planet. They have bodies back, they can go anywhere, regain their lives if they choose and you’re telling me there is *nothing* in your vast stream of knowledge that can save her from this?”

Hadley kept waiting for Hawk’s temper to explode. With this amount of distress, Hawk should be throwing chairs and yet he remained still. She squeezed his hand. “Hawk, I have to tell you that really I am the most fortunate woman to ever live because even though I’ve known you only a brief time, I’ve fallen absolutely in love with you. I don’t think most people, no matter what dimension they live in, ever get to experience that.”

Hawk’s eyes were huge. “Don’t say that Hadley. Don’t say it like that. That means you think you’re going to die and you need to tell me. I love you too but this isn’t the only time we’re going to say it. There are going to be lots of opportunities.”

She tried to shrug and groaned instead. “Well, just in case there aren’t.”

“Don’t say it.”

“I think I might be able to help.” Leon rose from the chair and Hawk jumped, putting himself between Hadley and Leon.

“Hear him out, brother.” Dragon took two steps away from the bed and turned his back on the scene, but Hadley had the impression he still listened very closely to what was going on.

“It’s an old power. No one has used it since the women died because it didn’t work back then, but it’s a spell designed to set things on the correct path. If your death is not what the universe wants, it will put you back where you belong.”

Hawk nodded. “Do it.”

Dragon cleared his throat. “Is there anything we can do to help you prepare for it?”

“No, I just need a moment.”

The heat inside Hadley’s body fumed again. How much *more* fixing could this damn dimension need? She closed her eyes. If there was any chance whatever Leon was about to do might work, then she needed to hold on, but it was getting harder and harder. Hawk placed his hand on her forehead.

“She is unbelievably hot.”

“By all that is and all that will be, set things onto the correct path. If this woman should live, let her live” Leon intoned.

Hadley couldn’t even open her eyes to see if any sort of movements accompanied what Leon said.

“Holy cow.” Dragon’s words of wonder filled the silent room. Seconds later, Hawk screamed and Hadley felt herself floating. She wasn’t sure where she was going, but at least she was finally cool. That was her final thought as she tumbled into oblivion.

Chapter Twenty

Hawk whirled on Leon. The tornado that had filled the room disappeared in a blink of an eye with Hadley inside of it.

“Where did she go?” In two seconds, Leon would be a dead man, king or no king.

“I have no idea. I thought she’d stay on the bed, either alive or dead, depending on what the universe willed.”

Hawk narrowed his eyes and grabbed Leon’s throat. “You thought there was a possibility she might die and you did it anyway?”

Dragon put his face right next to Hawk’s. “All he did was ask the universe to set things on the right path. You were here. He spoke a few words, the winds started, and Hadley vanished. We need to think. I know you’re crazed. I’ve never felt like you feel for Hadley but I can see what it is doing to you. Now, put the King down and let’s look at this logically.”

Damn! Dragon could be infuriating when he was right. Hawk let go of Leon, who sucked in a few breaths. Maybe he’d squeezed a little too tight. Hawk really didn’t care.

Dragon snapped his fingers. “Her body. She’s gone back to her body.”

Hawk nodded. “I bet you’re right.”

“So let’s return and see what’s happened. Can you return us all from different spaces or do we all need to be together again?”

Nodding, Dragon smiled. “I think I can manage to include all of the men regardless of their physical location.”

“I expect you to keep your word to Hadley. You will not go after any more women and the ones who want to leave can.”

“We’ll have to find some willing women, but if they want to stay, perhaps they can now give us female children.”

They’d better be getting their children. After what Hadley put herself through he’d be damned if it didn’t turn out the way she wanted. The blinding white light he’d seen the first time he travelled to Shadow Land filled his vision and he stood absolutely still, knowing Dragon had sent them back. His fists clenched at his sides, he willed Hadley to stay with him, to not leave him alone in the universe. He’d never survive without her.

With a bump, he hit the floor. Looking around, he quickly assessed he was back in the living room. A hand grabbed his arm. Hoping it was Hadley, he jerked his head up. His mother’s worried gaze met his.

“I’ve been pacing around here waiting for you to return.”

He pulled himself up. “Where is she?”

Leopard shook her head. “That’s just it. I have no idea. One second I was wiping her brow, the next, she vanished. Poof. Into thin air.”

“Damn it. Dragon?”

“Where could she have been sent if not here?” Dragon bit his fingernail and stared blankly into space. Hawk would have done anything to hear his brother’s thoughts right now. A loud commotion filled the room as not just his men but *all* of Hadley’s sisters hit the floor violently.

Stunned silence, thick as pea soup, took over the atmosphere. Seconds later, the

loudest uproar he'd ever heard deafened his ears. Men were talking over each other, the women shrieked and cried, and his mother gasped and backed into the wall behind her.

"You brought them back with you?"

"Ah..." Dragon stuttered and Hawk internally groaned. It couldn't be good that his brother seemed flustered. "I didn't mean to."

Stone stepped into his vision. "Hawk, I was right in the middle of a battle in those cursed mines. Send us back, we can beat them."

"Forget the mines. I know it's frustrating but we have pressing matters. The Lady Hadley has vanished. We thought she'd been sent back here."

"Hawk," a voice he hadn't heard in longer than he cared to remember caught his attention. "Is it true what Annabelle says? Did Hadley make it possible for all of us to leave that place?"

"Deirdre," He couldn't help the grin that crossed his face, he was so glad to see her. In her brief life on earth, they'd been good friends. "She did. She may have sacrificed herself for it too. We have no idea what happened to her."

"All of these women? They're ... Hadley's sisters?" His mother looked as if she wanted to vomit. In all of his years, he couldn't remember Leopard ever having this much female company around at the same time. Men were common, his father often hosted the Warriors here, but with the exception of his sister Rabbit, women were a rarity.

"That's right. They are the missing daughters of Zamara, princesses of Haven. They'll need to be brought to Astor. Can you arrange that, mother?"

She nodded and her eyes cleared. Leopard was task-oriented; he'd known she would do better if she were given an assignment.

Hawk turned his attention to the other sisters. Hadley would want him to make sure they were all right. He shook his head. No, he couldn't allow himself to start to think of her in the past tense, as if that was a given. Amazing people surrounded him, someone would find her, and then he would go and get her.

Annabelle looked the same as she had when last he'd seen her in the Shadow Land, only less red. She sat by herself, off to the side, and a vacant look in her eyes told him she was thinking about something other than her current situation. Bethany seemed pissed off—but then she always had—and Clarice huddled close to her. Eloise and Felicia were both well dressed, as if someone had taken care of them, but it was Grace who held his gaze.

Stone approached her, offering her a rag, which she took, although she still didn't look up from where she stared at the floor. The mines. If she knew Stone it meant she'd been in that cursed place. The lights in here must be killing her eyes.

"Stone, take Grace somewhere darker."

His younger comrade looked confused for a moment but then realization dawned in his eyes. He hurried the woman out of the room. Hell, Pettigrew women surrounded him. A sudden thought struck him as funny and he chuckled. Hadley, and of course Hailey, although he'd never met her, had been the only Pettigrew girls he hadn't seen right after their births. Even after he'd left, he'd come back secretly to see the others' births.

But not Hadley, because he'd already decided he would have to take action to stop the cycle and he knew it might involve having to use one of the babies. He couldn't let himself know the girls, even for a moment, if it meant they were going to be his means for getting back.

But Hadley had changed that. Hell, she had changed *everything*. He swung around to look at Dragon. His brother leaned against the wall, a thoughtful expression on his face.

“So if *you* didn’t get the women here, how did this come to be?”

Dragon shrugged. “I think it was Leon.”

“He sent out the power words, asking for things to be set correctly. They must have been meant to be here, which would mean that Hadley is where she is supposed to be, too.”

Hawk picked up a wooden chair and threw it against the wall. His men quickly dispersed. He suspected that after two hundred plus years together they knew better than to deal with him when he was like this. His brother, by contrast, didn’t budge.

“That was probably a three thousand year old chair designed and made by our grandmother.”

Hawk looked at the mess he made. “I’m surprised it ever survived Father. He broke more things than I ever could.” He kicked at a piece of splintered wood. “Now I guess its firewood.”

“Why did you break our heirloom?”

He stormed to the window. “*Because I’m sick to death of fate*. My fate is to be with Hadley. I don’t care what anyone else thinks, even some superior universal consciousness that you and Leon are content to trust. I have to find her.”

Dragon nodded. “All right, this is going to become my quest too, and I know who we need to call.”

“Who?”

“Rabbit. Follow me.”

Dragon marched himself into their parents’ room as if he owned it and picked up the water pitcher. He stared at it for a moment with a dumbfounded look on his face.

“Move.” Hawk shoved Dragon out of the way. “Not like the fancier one in Astor, I suppose.”

Hawk poured the water into the pitcher and concentrated on his sister. He imagined she had changed a great deal since he’d last seen her but it didn’t seem to matter, her face appeared on the screen.

For a second, all Hawk could do was stare at Rabbit. She was a younger, more serene looking version of his mother, except she had the Seer violet eyes. By the time it had been discovered that she was ‘different’ it hadn’t been as much of a shock as it had been when Dragon was born. He suspected his baby sister never knew the stings his older brother had.

“I’ve been expecting your call for over an hour.”

Damn the Seers and their extra-worldly senses that let them anticipate the future. You never could surprise them. At least this time, he didn’t need to; if Rabbit knew why they called perhaps she had prepared the information they needed.

“Where is she?” Not caring who heard him, he let some of the desperation he felt show in his voice.

“Earth.”

Hawk pounded the table, nearly tipping over the pitcher. “I would travel to the pits of hell for her but I must tell you I despise that place. There will not be a minute there I will not be dying to get back home.”

“Hawk, I’m afraid this all my fault.”

Rabbit's declaration started Hawk and he and Dragon both stared at the screen.
"How could that possibly be?"

"I was just a badly trained child when you left. I hadn't learned to keep my visions to myself unless there was dire need. I was just grateful to get one. So when I had my first vision of Zamara's future, I didn't think to not tell her."

"You told her she was going to be imprisoned and forced to mate and she *still* went? You told Zamara and you didn't tell *me*?"

Up until that moment, Hawk would have said he could no longer be surprised. He'd obviously been wrong.

"I told Zamara what I saw at the time, which was that she would have to suffer but that ultimately the man she was destined to be with would rescue her. I didn't tell you, brother, because it wasn't your business."

"You sent us in blind. It might have been nice to know I was simply escorting Zamara to a planned disaster and that it wouldn't be my fault, just destiny once again playing havoc with our lives through the mouth of my baby sister."

"Hawk, stop ranting." Dragon rolled his eyes. "She's just given you good news. Her future husband will rescue her."

"Well..." Rabbit looked down at her hands.

"Well, *what*?" Now even Dragon looked annoyed.

"He's wavering. He is at a crossroads in his life, if he goes in one direction, he will save her, if he doesn't, then he won't."

Hawk waved his hand in a dismissive gesture. "Enough. There will be time enough to discuss Zamara's future husband at a later date. How will I rescue Hadley?"

Rabbit sighed. "I don't see you doing that."

"What?" Hawk and Dragon both scoffed at her.

"I didn't say you wouldn't do it, just that I didn't see it. There is much I don't see." The emotion in that last statement made Hawk feel low. His sister, like all of them, put too much pressure on herself for perfection.

"The Gift of Sight has never been exact." Dragon spoke using his authoritative, expert tone. It grated on Hawk's nerves, but seemed to make Rabbit feel better.

"Thank you Rabbit. For her location alone you have done us a great service." Hawk disconnected the communication and stared at Dragon. "Still want to go with me even now that my ability to do this is in doubt even with our great Seers?"

"Normally, I would say no. I have no desire to get caught up in the disasters you seem to bring upon yourself. But, I must say, I am intrigued by this attachment you have with the woman. Love is not really something we talk much about. Plus, there will be the added benefit of returning her to the King. I'm sure to garner favor that way."

Hawk grinned. "You know, for just a moment, you were actually really likable, and then you had to keep talking."

"That's usually how I feel every time *you* open up your mouth."

Rolling his eyes, Hawk patted his brother's back. "Do I need a member of the royal family or can you open the portal?"

"Don't insult me. I could open a portal to Earth in my sleep."

"Then shut up and do it."

Hadley was on earth and he knew exactly who had her. *This* time he'd find a way to end the son-of-a-bitch once and for all. Zacharias Pettigrew—or whatever his name

was—had his hours numbered, and the best part was he didn't even know it yet.

Chapter Twenty-One

“There, she’s coming around, see?” A strange voice Hadley didn’t recognize drove into her pleasant cool unconsciousness and forced her to open her eyes.

Three faces loomed down at her. The first one, presumably the woman who’d spoken, Hadley had never seen before in her life, but she’d been in enough hospitals with various injuries to recognize a nurse’s uniform.

To the right, her sister Hailey stared at her with a face so close to her own and yet so different. Her twin’s eyes filled with tears and after a moment two slipped from her eye, which she quickly wiped away. “Oh thank heavens, I really feared the worst.”

“I told you, Hadley is too mean to die in a boat crash.”

Hadley’s gaze flew to the third speaker and she narrowed her eyes. She knew those tones too and she was less than thrilled to see him. Looking down at her, innocent as a newborn, was her father. Blond haired and blue eyed, he’d appeared forty years old her whole life. What used to be a funny family joke about good genetics was not so amusing anymore.

Panic filled Hadley’s head and she shot up in bed. The nurse placed a gentle hand on her shoulder. “Easy there, I’m going to go call the doctor and tell him you’re awake.” She needed to get out of here and fast. Better yet, she needed to get Hailey out of there and then she could deal with her father.

She almost begged the nurse to stay, to not leave her with her father, even if Hailey was present in the room.

Hadley swallowed, her mouth felt dry. Hailey, who had always been wonderful at anticipating everyone else’s needs, handed her a cup with water and a small pink straw. Taking a sip, she felt better.

How the *hell* had she gotten here? She made a split second decision to play stupid and see what she could accomplish by keeping her father from getting suspicious. “What’s going on? How did I get here?”

Hailey sat down on the side of the bed and stroked her head. “Had, do you not remember? Some terrorists stole you off your science vessel and you were nearly killed. When Dad’s men showed up to rescue you, they found you floating on some driftwood twenty-four hours later.”

If she hadn’t known better, she would have sworn that was plausible. The whole thing could have been one giant hallucination brought on by trauma, salt water, and too much direct sunlight. But she knew that wasn’t true. She’d seen her sisters, held them close, travelled through dimensions, spoken to the Giant Squid, and fallen in love with Hawk. None of that was made up in her head.

“I see.” She nodded. “Yes, I remember being kidnapped.” Silently, she prayed she could keep her answers vague and ambiguous.

“What did they want, baby girl?” Her father stepped closer to the bed. “They were all killed in the fire that took down the ship. We never knew what they wanted; did they tell you?”

Hadley smiled, but she feared that it came off as more of a smirk. Oh, they had told her things, all right. But what they had said she wouldn’t repeat to him. “I got the general

impression they were angry with you, Dad.”

Anything her Dad would have said was stopped by the arrival of the doctor who proceeded to poke and prod Hadley until she wanted to scream. As far as she was concerned, she had three objectives. The first was to get Hailey alone so she could somehow convince her sister that she was in grave danger staying near her father. Taking the Shadow People out of the equation had been wonderful for them and terrible for dear old dad. Hadley could guarantee that Leon would not be so forthcoming with the Breathless liquid her father needed to keep living.

The second goal was to figure out something to do about her mother. She couldn't be left to continue as she was and if the Warriors who remained here couldn't get to her, then maybe Hadley could. But that would mean finding some of them, convincing them not to tell her father what she knew, and learning the location of her mother's seclusion.

Finally, she needed to get back to Hawk. Her heart panged at the thought. That would be nearly impossible and it was very likely he had no idea where she was. Dimensional travel was not something she knew how to do, although if she was going to get so consistently thrown from one place to another then maybe it was a skill she needed to learn.

Shaking her head as the doctor left the room, she decided she couldn't deal with thinking about that right now. It would only make her crazy. When the time came, she would figure it out. She had to—her whole future happiness depended on it.

To make matters worse, Hadley suspected she had to get this all done before her father spoke to Leon and learned that he would not be getting any more magical support to keep himself alive. Then she'd be a dead woman.

Hailey walked into the room humming to herself and carrying what looked like lilies in a blue vase. Hailey never seemed to remember that they made Hadley sneeze. She couldn't help smiling at her sister's absentmindedness; it was a trait you could count on with Hailey.

“Hailey, quickly, before Dad comes back, we have to talk.”

Her sister lowered her eyebrows and walked towards the bed. “What's wrong big sister?” Hadley smiled; she was, in fact, two minutes older than Hailey.

How the hell was she supposed to do this? Hadley took a deep breath. “Ever read any science fiction?”

Hailey's shake of the head was all the answer Hadley needed. This wasn't going to be easy. “Ever watched any on television?”

“Well sure, I've seen some. I mean who hasn't?” Hailey's voice raised two octaves, a trait that always came out when something made her nervous.

“Hailey, our life is a science fiction extravaganza.”

Her sister raised an eyebrow. “How hard did you hit your head?”

“Don't you think it's weird that we don't know Mom, don't even have any pictures of her, have never seen a wedding album, or that Dad never tells stories about her.”

Hailey shrugged sitting down on the bed as she examined her nails. “I guess I always assumed he didn't want to talk about her because he either loved her so much he couldn't or he didn't love her enough to talk about her.”

“It's neither of those things.”

“Oh yes? You're suddenly an expert on all things Dad, are you? Okay, fill me in.”

Hadley proceeded to do just that, and to her sister's credit, Hailey never said a word,

never interrupted, and never made any indication that she thought Hadley was nuts.

When Hadley finished, Hailey sat very still, her eyes wide. Finally she spoke, “You’re joking, right?”

“I wish I was.”

“But things like that just don’t happen. You’re the scientist, you of all people should know that.”

A loud bang sounded as the door to the hospital room opened and hit the wall hard. It took Hadley a few minutes to realize who stood there. She’d seen him before but it was the bald head that really gave him away. It was Hawk’s second-in-command, Jeremiah.

“You’ve told her, haven’t you?”

“Told Hailey, yes.”

“Damn it, this changes everything.” Jeremiah stalked towards the bed. “You’re not even supposed to be here right now. This wasn’t how I saw it in my vision.”

Hailey’s head moved back and forth as she followed the exchange between the two. She pointed at Jeremiah. “I’ve seen you somewhere, haven’t I? You’ve been following me. I thought I was out of my mind.”

“This is Jeremiah, he’s one of Hawk’s warriors. We left him behind on Earth.”

“Hadley, get up, your father is coming and he has the other warriors. He’s managed to convince them you’re a threat to the Princess.”

Hadley didn’t need to be told twice. Pulling the IV connection out of her hand, she jumped up from the bed.

“He believes what you believe?” Hailey shouted now.

“He doesn’t just believe it; he knows it to be true.”

Jeremiah ran to the door and stared out at the silent hallway. “Can you run, Hadley?”

She nodded. “I can.”

“Good, because I figure we have a two minute escape window.”

Jeremiah ran back and grabbed Hailey. He scooped her up in his arms. It was a smart move, as there was no way Hailey was coming with them willingly. Hadley paused for a second, finding the whole thing very amusing as she watched Hailey ready herself to shriek just as Jeremiah’s hand clamped over her mouth. Just days ago, shrieking was exactly what she would have been doing. Now she was so used to this type of situation, she didn’t even need to be carried.

“Lead the way, Jeremiah.”

He ran for the door and Hadley kept as close behind him as she could manage. For all she knew, they were going to have to run for hours. Two nurses tried to stop them. Jeremiah, with one arm, cold-cocked both of them as they made it to the stairwell.

As they took the stairs two-by-two Hadley concentrated on her footing. *Move*, she instructed herself over and over again. There was no time to waste. If they caught her, she was dead and, to make matters even more distressing, so was Hailey.

The hospital alarm sounded, ringing in her ears, and Hadley wondered if they’d make it out the door.

“Jeremiah...” She panted, trying to talk as she ran.

“I know, I’m not sure how we’re going to get out either.” He swung around, looking left and right, Hailey still kicking in his arms. “Damn it woman, you don’t want me to drop you. Trust me on that.”

“*Whatever* happens, get her out of here. She still doesn’t believe and she’ll have no

chance. Maybe I can reason with the men, talk to them about home, and flying in the claws of birds.”

Jeremiah’s eyes got wide. “I didn’t think I was homesick until you said that.”

“What’s your animal?”

Grinning widely, he continued down the stairs. “The Jackal.”

A door at the bottom of the stairs slammed. Hadley skidded to a stop behind Jeremiah.

“*Where is she?*” The unmistakable voice blotted out everything else.

Hadley had never been so glad to hear his voice in her life. Hawk. Somehow he was here. Tears sprang to her eyes as she pushed past Jeremiah into Hawk’s arms. “I’m right here.” She knew it was too early to feel relief, but just having Hawk there made the feeling start to creep up her insides.

His mouth claimed hers hard and she practically purred.

“This is all very romantic, but I can’t imagine Jeremiah was dragging the two of them through the hall because he felt like it.” Hadley’s eyes whirled to Dragon. He looked the most disheveled she’d ever seen him. Somehow in the brief course of their acquaintance, Dragon had gone from one of the most put-together men to utter chaos personified.

Jeremiah looked at his watch. “Minute and a half before Pettigrew arrives with Prize and the whole gang in tow.”

Hawk raised an eyebrow. “Then maybe its time and past I do something about Pettigrew.”

Dragon shrugged. “Sounds like fun.”

“No.” Jeremiah sounded so authoritative it stopped everyone in their tracks.

“Stopping Pettigrew isn’t your job, it’s not your path.”

“Is it yours?” Hawk sounded skeptical. “I’ve recently become acquainted with the flaws of the so-called Sight.”

“I’m not saying if it’s mine or not but you have your role to play and yours is to get Hadley to Astor, where I imagine she has not been yet or we wouldn’t all be standing here.” Jeremiah grasped Hawk’s arm. “Get your woman to Astor.”

“I’m not going to just leave my sister here while I go gallivanting off to Astor with Hawk. There is still a lot of retribution to dish out here.”

“Hell, you sound like him.” Dragon rolled his eyes and Hawk shoved him against the wall.

“Everyone has a path, my lady. Yours is very important and it’s waiting for you on Haven. You are not responsible for all of this but we need you in Haven. Things will fall to chaos without you. Hailey and I have to do the next part.”

“I hate to agree with anything Jeremiah says, but, in this case, it’s sound logic.”

Dragon pushed his brother away. “Perhaps we should all return to Haven.”

Jeremiah shook his head. “Not you, Dragon.”

“Oh, crap.”

The door at the top of the stairs slammed open. “Stop them, they’ve taken my daughters.”

“Daddy!” Hailey screamed and Jeremiah covered her mouth with his hand. “Do that again and I’m afraid I’ll have to knock you out.” Hadley feared he actually would and opened her mouth to speak when Hawk grabbed her hand and sliced it with his knife. She

cursed, unprepared for the assault of her still healing hand.

Seconds later she saw the portal open. Hailey gasped next to her. She swung around to look at her sister.

“I love you Hailey, we’ll see each other again.”

Hadley wasn’t so sure why she was certain of that, but she was.

Swallowing, she continued. “Take care of her, Jeremiah.” He nodded and she smiled sadly. Just as she knew in her heart she would see Hailey again, she knew she would never be back to Earth.

“So much for my plans of tracking the Giant Squid.”

The sound of footsteps running down the stairwell ended her musings.

She smiled at Hawk. “Let’s go.”

Together they once again stepped through the portal.

Chapter Twenty-Two

They hit the ground gently. It was another open field, but this one was filled with rocks. He scooped her up and laid her back down in a grassy clearing a few feet away. Off in the distance, the sound of a rushing river filled the horizon. Just in case it had been hard, Hawk took the brunt of the fall, keeping Hadley on top of him. They'd spent the journey in silence, just glad to be together and to not be dragging anyone with them this time. Immediately, he rolled on top of her.

She ran her hands up his back, stopping at his neck. He leaned down and kissed her, hard. He'd almost lost her. The thought repeated in his head over and over. "Hadley, it was too close, we came too close to it all being over."

She nodded, nibbling on his neck. "I don't want to think right now, Hawk. Kiss me."

"I think if I start kissing you, I'm not going to be able to stop. I think I'm going to want to make love with you right here on the ground."

This time he tried to kiss her gently. He hadn't managed to the first time they were together and she was the most precious thing in his life. More important than King, country, or loyalty to his Warriors. Hadley could ask anything of him and he'd give it.

What was amazing is that he knew she would never ask more than he would be happy to give.

She shook gently in his arms and he slid his hands down her throat to the top of her neckline. Their faces sat merely inches apart and her breath felt warm and smelled sweet. He was already so hard it was painful and they hadn't even done anything yet. But looking at Hadley, being close to her, made his groin stand at attention even without the possibility of consummating their love.

He pulled what was left of her hospital gown off of her body and ran his hands up and down her legs. She shuddered and gasped. For just a moment, he allowed his gaze to travel her naked body. Hadley was perfection itself. Long legs attached to curves that didn't quit, with breasts he wanted time to suckle and memorize. If she would let him, he would spend eternity worshiping her like this.

"Hawk?" Forcing his gaze to meet her eyes, he saw she was happy, albeit confused.

"Did you know that in your eyes, although they are truly the greenest of green, one gold speck illuminates from the middle?"

"No. But I look so different here than I do on Earth."

"You're crazy. You've always been gorgeous, since the moment I first saw you, I knew you would be the undoing of me."

"The undoing?"

He leaned down and planted a kiss on her nose. "That I would never be able to resist you, that you could have whatever you wanted from me anytime you wanted it."

"I can?"

He laughed. "Oh, you have no idea."

She reached between them and undid his pants' zipper. He helped her by pulling his pants off while she tugged his tee shirt over his head. Kissing her again, he was relieved when she opened her mouth to meet him tongue to tongue. Her breasts pressed against his bare chest triggered sensations up and down his spine that went beyond any pleasure he

had known before.

She squeezed her legs around him and he groaned. They were entangled in each other, her pale porcelain-like skin illuminated against his darker tone. He bit down on her shoulder, her neck, and the nipple of her left breast. She arched off the ground.

Unable to wait any longer, he reached down into her core and stroked her most private area.

“Oh yes, Hawk, that’s what I need.”

He loved the way she felt on his fingers. “Me too, darling, me too.”

Hawk moved until he was in a good position to enter her. Determined to keep the pace slow, he pushed home. He thrust forward, gradually picking up momentum as she moaned and writhed beneath him.

There was nothing so exquisite as the feel of being inside Hadley. In and out he moved, knowing that every second he was inside of her was a gift to be treasured and never forgotten. He could feel her muscles contract against his and within moments she screamed. He pressed his mouth on hers, wanting to actually taste the sensation of Hadley in his mouth when she came. His own release was just as forceful. Truly joyous, he laid his forehead on hers and refused to move until it was absolutely necessary.

Hadley’s hands brushing over his face brought him out of his pleasure-induced stupor.

“Am I crushing you?” He needed to move, he was twice her size.

“No. But the ground is getting a little uncomfortable.”

“Ha.” He pulled himself off her, groaning slightly to leave her warmth as he stood. He offered her a hand helping her up.

“Hawk, I have a problem, I have no clothes.”

She was right. They’d traveled over in her hospital gown, and that had been in bad shape to begin with, but he’d then torn it to pieces. He bent over and picked up his tee shirt. Looked like she’d be making do in one of those again.

“Here.” She took it with a smile and a glimmer in her eyes. This one was even bigger than the last and she swam in it.

“It’s a good thing it’s warm or I couldn’t let you give me your shirt.”

“Some day, I swear we’ll get you a wardrobe fit for a queen. You won’t have to wander the countryside wearing nothing but that.”

“It’s okay.” She twirled like a ballet dancer. “I kind of like it, if you want to know the truth.” Her face turned somber. “We need to get to Astor.”

He nodded. “I know.”

Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out his whistle. He hadn’t used it in centuries and he didn’t know if his birds would come, but it was worth a shot. When he blew into it, even though he couldn’t hear anything, he knew his birds could. The fact was confirmed when seconds later the birds arrived, flying in their demonstrative way, circling, looking down as he and Hadley watched in awe.

Sighing, he clapped his hands to show he wanted them to descend. “They came.”

“Of course.”

“It wasn’t a given. These birds don’t know me as their ancestors did.”

Hadley shrugged. “You’re a hard man to resist.”

A gust of wind whirled Hadley’s hair until it gathered at the top of her head. Her cheeks were pink and rosy, her mouth red like her hair and completely kissable. She’d

never looked more beautiful. “Hadley, will you be my wife?”

What had possessed him to do that? It was too soon and she was about to find out what it meant to be royal on Haven. She’d be much too important to marry him. But damned if he’d take it back. He loved her, she belonged to him. He wanted it in writing and recognized by everyone so no one would dare to make advances on her.

“I will.”

The lead bird swept down and picked them both up. Hadley shrieked and he grinned. The girl was never going to get used to flying this way.

* * * *

It was a long distance to Astor, and by the time they made it the sun had set and stars illuminated the night sky. The birds skidded to a stop and let Hadley down. She wobbled for a second before finding her balance.

Walking over to him, she wrapped her arms around his neck. “When can we get married?”

“Tomorrow, if you like.”

“Ahem.” Hawk jumped and pushed Hadley behind his back.

Hands raised in the sky, Stone grinned. “Didn’t want to frighten you, just wanted you to know that the Royals await the two of you in the observatory.”

Hawk raised an eyebrow. “Right now?”

“Immediately.”

Taking Hadley’s hand he brought it to his mouth and kissed it. He didn’t need to know she was nervous, he could read it in her body language and the way her breath had suddenly come up short.

Kissing her hair, he whispered. “It’ll be okay.”

They walked in silence through the great hall and down the staircase that would take them where they needed to go.

“Are we going underground?” Hadley looked from side to side. He could see her taking everything in.

“Underwater actually.” Her eyes got huge.

They stepped through the door, lavishly decorated with mahogany and oak fixtures, into the throne room. As they entered, he could hear chitchat and laughter but their appearance caused the chamber to go silent.

Hadley tugged at her shirt, and he wished he’d had time to get them both clothes. He wasn’t exactly comfortable seeing the King and Queen half-clothed either.

The throne room never ceased to amaze him. Made up entirely of transparent walls, the whole room was surrounded by the ocean. As a child, he’d sat on the ground and watched whales, dolphins, and sharks play as his father had conducted meetings with the King.

The King jumped to his feet and ran down the staircase to greet them. Hawk was shocked. He’d never known the man to be demonstrative. Even more unbelievable, he took Hadley’s hand and kissed it.

“My granddaughter, welcome. You bring the country back to life with your presence.”

“Please, your Highness ... ah, Grandfather ... don’t thank me. I haven’t done anything on purpose, it’s all just sort of happened through me.”

“Don’t underestimate the power of Fate to choose who it wants to perform its path. Everyone here tells me you are an extraordinary woman.”

Hawk looked up. Friends and family filled the room. All of his Warriors were present as well as Hadley’s sisters and his mother and sister.

“I’m grateful but I feel the praise is undue.” She looked like she would say more, but just then gasped and pulled her hand from Hawk’s grasp. Hawk reached for his sword, prepared to fight any danger that might come her way.

Hadley rushed to one of the transparent walls, touching it with her hands as she gasped again. That was when he saw them too: the giant squid had come out in droves to see her.

The Queen, who had been silent up to this point, rose to her feet. “Dear heavens, I’ve never seen so many before.”

Hadley turned around to the crowd, tears in her eyes. “They’re sick.”

“How do you know?” Hawk charged forward to her and placed a hand on her arm.

“They’re talking to me. Can no one else hear them?” She looked around, her eyes pleading with anyone else for reassurance. He wished he could give it to her. “They’ve wanted to come but something has been making them ill. They don’t know what it is.”

She stared into Hawk’s eyes and he grasped what she meant to do. “The last time you did this, it nearly killed you.”

“I must.” There was nothing else she could say that he would have understood so well. Obligation and a need to do what was right were engrained in her soul.

“I won’t let them kill or harm you in any way.”

Hadley nodded. “I don’t think they would do that. It’s different from the Shadow Land. They haven’t asked me for anything, let alone demanded it. This whole time they’ve been trying to take care of me. Somehow, they’re dimension travelers, they’re everywhere but belong nowhere.”

The emotion in her voice brought Hawk up short. “You don’t think of yourself that way, do you Hadley? You belong here with me and I belong wherever you are. That’s how this works.”

“I know, but if I didn’t have you, that is how I would be, too.”

Hadley walked to the glass and he watched in awe as it started to glow under her touch. In mere days she had become the most powerful person he’d ever known, and that included his waylaid brother now residing, for some reason, on Earth.

The Giant Squid seemed to freeze, unmoving even in the currents of the ocean. Sparks of electricity drove through their bodies, lighting them up like decorative bulbs. They were all sorts of colors, red, green, gold, and blue.

Gasping, Hadley fell backwards into Hawk’s arms, her hands red like tomatoes.

“Are you okay?”

She nodded. “I am, amazingly, and moreover so are they.”

Dancing above the ceiling, the Giant Squids did indeed seem well.

The Queen crossed to Hadley and threw her arms around her. “You truly are a gift to all of us. Thank you for coming home.”

When the Queen released her, Hadley walked straight into Hawk’s arms. “I really need to change into some clothes.”

Personally, he liked looking at her in nothing but his shirt but he understood her desire to be properly dressed.

He held her hand as they walked toward the door. “I don’t know what’s going to happen in my life, Hawk, I certainly never could have anticipated any of this but as long as I’m with you, I’m certain all will be well.”

He was certain of it too, and as soon as he got her alone, he would show her. The crowds around them roared with delight and Hadley covered her mouth with her hand to stifle a giggle. He was a happy man.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Five months later

All this time and the Seers could tell her nothing of Hailey. It was endlessly frustrating. Hawk stood across from her in the throne room. The King, or Grandfather as he insisted she call him, sat straight in his chair unsmiling. The whole room was more somber than she'd ever seen it before.

"What news?" Hawk's voice rang out in the room.

"We have word through our spies that Leon has restarted the supply of Breathless to Pettigrew."

Hadley flinched, it was what she feared, and it had happened.

She cleared her throat. "Did they say *why* he did it?"

"He still needs women to breed. They were not able to convince any of the women to stay behind voluntarily."

"I wonder why." Hadley raised an eyebrow. It was unusual for Grace to speak. She was the sister she still knew the least.

"And there's something else, isn't there?" Hawk cut right to the point.

The news of the Breathless was bad but not bad enough to convene the whole royal family.

"Leon does not like how he was treated by our recently crowned Prince Hawk. He has declared war on us and means to take all of our women to breed with his men."

That was, indeed, bad news. Although she was not, and hoped never to be, supreme leader on Haven, all eyes fell to her as they had been doing more and more often. She rose from her seat.

"Let him come. As I watch my sisters gain their birthrights and become more powerful every day, I am convinced there is nothing we cannot do. Our Warriors are the most talented and well trained in any dimension. We have reestablished our links with the Great Ones and all of our animals. Certainly, the Mystics are not matched in the Shadow Realm. If Leon is foolish enough to come here, he will rue the day."

Cries of joy filled the air as everyone applauded. Silently she met Hawk's eyes. To everyone else he looked serene but she could see the deep-rooted concern in his eyes both for her and their unborn baby. As far as she was concerned, this was Year One, the first in the new dimension they had all created together. It was theirs to defend and they would do so.

The End

About the Author:

As a teenager, Rebecca would hide in her room to read her favorite romance novels when she was supposed to be doing her homework. She hopes that these days, her parents think it was worth it.

She is the mother of three adorable boys, and she is fortunate to be married to her best friend. They live in northern New Jersey and try not to freeze too badly during the winter months.

A hardcore fan of science fiction, fantasy, and the paranormal, Rebecca tries to use all of these elements in her writing. She's been told she's a little bloodthirsty so she hopes that when you read her work you'll enjoy the action-packed ride that always ends in romance. In her world, anything is possible, anything can happen, and you should suspect it probably will.

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