

# COEXIST

Keegan's Chronicles

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*For my mother.  
Thank you for sharing your love of books,  
and teaching your children to use their imaginations.*

*Prophecy: An elfin child on the side of the light will be born with the gift of sight. He will be the son of a great warrior. His father will lead the great battle with his son by his side. This child is the only chance the elves have to avoid extinction.*

"The Book of Elfin Prophecy"  
Compiled 112 BCE

## CHAPTER 1

Keegan's call echoed in Rourk's mind as he was finishing his set. She always came to him when he least expected her, after which he was unable to focus on little else but her. His hands gripped the bar tightly and he tried to ignore the pull of her thoughts. He tried to focus on training, on the cold steel and the smell of sweat in the room—anything that could take his mind off of the one girl who owned it.

Taking a deep breath, he shook his head and unclenched his jaw, quickly finishing up the set. He had to force his hands to uncurl from the bar; it was almost painful. He wiped his face and tossed the towel in the bin—the rest of the workout would have to wait for tonight.

Using one of his secondary gifts, he closed his eyes and visualized her face. It was nothing for him to picture her, to bring her into focus like a high-powered lens. Rourk smiled. She was at her favorite spot; a private corner of paradise on her parents' land.

Her beautiful auburn hair blended in with the fall leaves that surrounded her. The dress she wore was pale green and ankle-length, flowing ethereally around her body. He watched a smile spread across her face as she inspected a rock from the creek, and laughed when she slipped it into her camera bag.

The first time it had taken him hours to navigate to her location. When the pull came, it was now just a twenty-minute hike through some woods.

Grabbing his bag, he jumped in his old beat up truck and headed towards her, probably driving a little faster than necessary. It was an urgent need to be near her when he heard her call, so he could never get there fast enough.

When he reached her location, he climbed the rugged terrain hastily. The dirt had the loose feel of earth unpacked by human feet; with every step, he sank a little, hindering his progress. The sun sparkled through the canopy above him, illuminating the path he forged through the trees, though it didn't offer any warmth in the cool afternoon. A branch scraped him across the face and he impatiently pushed it to the side, hardly caring whether it had left a mark. Finally, he reached the top, bursting through the tree line and into pure daylight.

Rourk stood rigid, his lean body tensed as he looked over the edge of the rugged cliff. *Why do I do this to myself? I shouldn't even be here. She's killing me. I have no self-control.*

In the elfin society, life mates were predetermined using complicated methods to ensure ideal matches. The secret of this formula had a need-to-know basis; meaning he would never know how Keegan was chosen for him. There were many creatures in this world, but his kind held their secrets close to their chest.

There were certain rules his kind had to follow. One's lifemate may have been chosen at birth, but the first and most important rule was that they could not meet until they both turned 18. Growing up knowing that one's other half was out there waiting brought a sense of comfort to Rourk. Ordinarily, neither knew their other half until they became of age. Their society believed it was better this way so they could enjoy their childhood.

*So how did he find her?*

Someone had told her his name. She pulled him closer to her each time she thought of him. It was as involuntary as breathing. When he was younger he could resist with ease. As he got closer to being of age, curiosity got the better of him. Sometimes he wished he'd resisted so he didn't have to endure the agony of waiting now. Although, he knew he loved seeing her even if it caused him pain.

Keegan was standing on the rocks, the water rushing around her feet, with camera in hand as usual. One minute, she skipped across the rocks

like a child and the next she would stop, a look of total concentration taking over her face. That was when she started snapping photos.

Staring at her, Rourk squatted and rested his hands on his knees, wondering what she saw through her lens. He watched as she jumped from a rock and slipped, her arms flailing as she almost fell into the water. His heart lurched. A strong need to protect her filled his body, and if her laugh hadn't echoed up to him like music, he was poised to jump in after her. But instead, her face broke into a huge grin as she steadied herself and continued to take photos. He relaxed, content to stand and watch her for hours.

Rourk didn't even know her name, but he knew he'd never seen anything so magnificent in his life. Her wavy hair glistened in the sunlight. She had a delicate face that was round, with large blue-green eyes and full lips. With her cheeks flushed from the cold fall air, she reminded him of a porcelain doll. He knew all too well, though, that looks could be deceiving. She looked sweet and innocent, but it was her eyes that gave her away. They were bold and daring, constantly observing her surroundings. Rourk smiled to himself; she would soon belong to him.

It took a lot of self-control not to approach her, but Rourk knew that would be breaking the rules. He accepted that they were in place for a reason. He had to be patient. Their time would come. Unfortunately, she was over a year younger than he, which meant he would have to wait longer than he would like. He pondered this as he watched her pack up, lovingly storing her camera away in its bag with her hair falling over her face. It wasn't until she had disappeared down the path to her house that Rourk finally turned and left.

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Keegan sat at her small black desk looking through the photos she'd taken that morning. Her hair had been driving her crazy for the last hour, falling over her face with nearly every movement, so she pulled it into a bun. Securing it with a pencil, she continued to study the shots. She noticed there were a few decent ones she could add to her Tumblr page; she had a small circle of followers there who seemed to enjoy her pictures as much as she loved taking them. She loved photography. Life

was nothing more than a series of moments and a picture could capture that moment.

Her moments often felt empty. Sighing, she turned her head to gaze out the window, her chin resting in her hand as she let her mind wander. If she had Rourk, maybe she would feel...more fulfilled. All she knew about her partner was his name. Thaddeus, her brother, was a seer and he had told her when she was younger. He said if she ever felt that she was in danger to think of Rourk's name.

Of course, she thought his name often, even when she was not in danger. She loved the sound of it: *Rourk*. She believed he would be a powerful warrior like her father, but she wouldn't know for sure until they met. It was possible he could turn out to be a seer like her brother or a healer like her mother. There were many powers passed down through their elfin bloodlines.

Keegan smiled, leaning back in her seat to prop one barefoot on the edge of her chair. Most humans automatically imagined elves as Santa Claus' little helpers with enormous ears and fuzzy green tights. This could not be further from the truth. Seriously, she had never met an elf that worked for Santa.

Evolution had allowed them to blend in with the humans. The females tended to be smaller than average. Most were only between 4'9"-5'2" tall. The part about pointed ears was true. However, their ears were pointed in a cute way, and not overly large like those in most mythology projects. Due to the fact that their ancestors were from Ireland, the elves tended to have reddish hair.

Her room didn't look like an elf's room that was for sure. Two of her walls were pale lavender, a color complimentary to the vivid emerald green of the other two. She had posters of her favorite bands and several of her favorite snapshots framed all around the room. The bed was large with a fluffy purple comforter and four fat pillows upon which a few of her childhood stuffed animals were propped.

And there was the light, lots of daylight from her windows. Her room was her safe haven, almost as much as her spot in the woods...

Keegan was startled out of her thoughts by the sound of the door opening downstairs. It was too early for her parents to be home and her pesky brother was at Sam's house. Quickly she closed her eyes and

pictured the front door, and what she saw brought a smile to her face. It was Anna, one of her best friends.

Anna had been trying to sneak up on her since they first met in the fourth grade. Keegan debated with herself whether or not to let her succeed this one time. Smiling to herself, she knew that was not an option. She focused her mind and felt the familiar tingling throughout her body that came with using her gift. She was in no hurry because Anna couldn't see her—invisibility was Keegan's main power. Personally, she thought it was the coolest ability in the family, but the others did not agree. Her mom thought it was ironic that invisibility was her ability because Keegan always wanted to be the center of attention.

Down in the kitchen, Anna wistfully looked around. She loved coming to Keegan's house. It always felt so inviting; there was a certain calmness about being there that radiated throughout. It was probably the soothing sound of the rushing water from the massive wall fountain, or maybe it was the energy from the crystals collected by Keegan's mother. Whatever it was, the moment she stepped through the door a sense of serenity washed over her.

The house felt empty of inhabitants. Only the chirping of birds outside the open window broke the steady hum of the refrigerator. The large wooden table was clean, all six placemats perfectly spaced around a lovely centerpiece of wildflowers Keegan's mom must have picked. Anna put a hand to the tabletop and closed her eyes, just allowing the peace of the home to overtake her. She needed it.

Keegan crept up behind Anna silently, trying not to laugh. Her best friend was off in space and had no idea she was there. She focused her mind again and, amid the tingling, she materialized before tapping her friend's shoulder. "Gotcha!"

Anna turned and laughed, feigning surprise.

*Oh Keegan, I always know when you are there. If you only knew that I have secrets of my own.*

Anna never let on because she knew Keegan enjoyed winning. It was a small price to pay to keep her best friend happy.

As usual, Anna's green eyes were outlined in heavy eyeliner—blue today—and her lashes were long and thick. She had shimmery pink lip gloss on her pencil-lined lips; she looked like a rock star.

Keegan glanced over her eccentric friend's outfit to see what style she'd adopted for the day. Her bangs, which she habitually pushed to the side, were now purple beneath a black top hat that only Anna could have pulled off. The rest of the day's ensemble of choice consisted of a grey tank top, a blue cardigan, and a pink skirt with bright yellow flowers that came just above her knees. To pull the look together she wore sparkly silver Converse shoes.

"You know I hate you," Keegan said with a grin, bumping her best friend's shoulder playfully with her own.

Anna stared at Keegan indignantly, her skinny arms crossing her chest. "Why would you hate me?"

"Who else could pull off that outfit and make it look natural?" Keegan said.

Anna gave a little curtsy and giggled. "Thank you."

"You are not going to believe what happened today!" Anna continued, grinning from ear to ear and jumping up and down so that her skirt flounced and her shoes caught the sunlight shining through the window. Sparkles danced across the walls of the kitchen like a disco ball.

Playing along, Keegan bounced up and down and said, "Let me guess, Xavier finally asked you out?"

"I wish!" For a brief moment, the excited look vanished from Anna's face and was replaced with sadness. Xavier had been her friend since childhood. Anna had recently realized her feelings for him were more than friendship, but sadly, he did not return her feelings.

"All right, just tell me what has you so excited," Keegan said.

"Well, I was walking to the bus when I saw a sign for a New Age fair tomorrow!" Anna jumped up and down. "It's a sign. We must go!"

Keegan grinned. "Anna, you seriously believe in all that nonsense?"

Looking shocked Anna replied, "Certainly! There has to be something more in this world than what the average eye sees."

*If you only knew Anna, there is so much more to this world than humans know,* Keegan thought. However, she was not about to reveal that knowledge.

"Don't forget to call Lauren and fill her in," Keegan told her.



“But of course,” Anna said, pressing a hand to her chest innocently. “If there were only the two of us we couldn’t be called the three amigos.”

Keegan rolled her eyes, laughing.

The girls popped some popcorn and chatted in front of the television for a while, muting the commercials and blaring the reality show they both loved. When she had to leave, Anna gave Keegan a hug and headed out.

With a little time to kill before she would be tired, Keegan decided to look through her photos again. Her favorite was a photo of a leaf blowing by itself in the wind. It reminded her of herself. She often felt all alone, just floating along. As much as she loved hanging out with her human friends, like the time she had just spent hanging with Anna, she wished she could tell them what she truly was.

Staring at her photos she realized her favorite thing to photograph was the beauty of nature. There was something fascinating about the outdoors. It amazed her that she could document the seasons as they changed through photographs. Elves loved nature and that was something she hoped evolution never changed.

She put the camera and computer away; Keegan knew she should go to bed. Time always seemed to get away from her when she found herself caught up in the editing and uploading of her photos. It was hard enough for her to wake up on time, not to mention when she stayed up all hours of the night.

Keegan put on her favorite plaid pajamas and crawled into bed, pulling her purple blanket under her chin. A faint smile played on her lips as she thought of Anna’s eagerness for the fair tomorrow. It would probably be fun.

## CHAPTER 2

Keegan woke up late as usual after hitting the snooze button too many times. The blaring of the alarm had finally gotten on her nerves. Rolling out of bed and into the bathroom, she stared at her reflection in the mirror. Her long auburn hair was a tangled mess. Mascara was smudged under her eyes and all she wanted to do was crawl back in bed. She could hear her family downstairs having breakfast, so rather than disappear back under the covers, she decided to join them.

Her mom was standing at the counter pouring hot water over a mug of tea leaves. She was wearing a pair of pale blue jeans and a fitted white button down shirt, her feet bare on the stones of the kitchen floor. Glancing over her shoulder as Keegan trudged sleepily into the kitchen, she was surprised to see her daughter. “What gets you out of bed before noon on a weekend?”

Keegan plopped down on the stool across from her father. “I have plans with Anna.” She reached over and grabbed a slice of toast off her dad’s plate.

“You’re lucky your mother burnt the toast or you’d be in trouble.” Dad grinned through a mouth full of eggs, his hazel eyes sparkling merrily at her. He had the local daily newspaper spread on the table before him and half a glass of her mom’s freshly squeezed orange juice in one hand.

“The toast isn’t burnt,” Mom said, laughing as she took a seat next to him and tugged playfully at his full, orange beard. As usual, she had put a plate of food in front of her husband and her son, but hadn’t made one of her own. Keegan’s mom stared at her over the teacup. “I’m sure you guys will have fun. Don’t stay out too long. Do you need any money?”

“Sure,” Keegan answered, snagging her dad’s other remaining piece of toast and making a funny face at her baby brother, Warrick. She loved the sound of his laugh. “I can always use a little more for Starbucks.”

While her mother ventured across the kitchen to rifle through her purse, Keegan looked over at her brother. He was being no more silent than usual, lost in his own thoughts as he slowly ate his Cocoa Pebbles. “Hey Thaddeus, any plans today or are you going to do your recluse act and stay in your room?”

“For your information, Sam is coming over.” He gave her a dirty look across the table. “We’re going to play paintball.”

“You guys are lame. Get out of the house and around people instead of in the woods or locked in your room.”

“Whatever Keegan, just because I don’t want to go shopping all day and act like a fool with my friends.”

Keegan hopped to her feet and plucked Warrick from his highchair. She sang loudly as she spun around the room, the baby babbling happily in her arms.

“Mom, make her shut up, she sucks,” Thaddeus complained.

“She does not.” Her mother managed to tuck a folded up bill in the pocket of Keegan’s sweatpants as she twirled by.

“She only does that to get on my nerves.” Thaddeus slouched in his seat, crossing his arms angrily over his chest.

“Somebody is grumpy this morning!” Keegan sang brightly to Warrick, whose laughter was maniacal in return.

“That’s not true; she sings even when you are not home,” her mother said, sipping her tea. Her eyes followed her daughter around the room, sparkling. She smiled. “Be careful, Keegan, that’s a baby’s full of eggs and bacon.”

Once Keegan finished the song, she swept dramatically across the room and with one last spin she handed Warrick to her dad. Running up the stairs, she headed back to the bathroom to jump in the shower.

Wrapped in a towel, she looked through her closet and couldn’t decide what to wear. *What does one wear when about to find out the future?* Finally, Keegan decided on a pair of dark skinny jeans and grey shirt. At the last minute, she grabbed a teal scarf to bring out her eyes. One last twirl in front of the mirror and she was satisfied with her choice. She ran down the stairs.

“See you later,” she called as she rushed out the door.

Keegan jumped on her bike and rode to her favorite Starbucks. The day was shaping up to be a lot nicer than the day before as the sun beat its warmth down on her pale skin. Slightly annoyed with herself, she realized she forgot to put on sunscreen. *Great*, she thought, now her freckles would come out more.

When she walked in, she took a deep breath. She loved the smell of Starbucks, as well as the soothing noises of the barista's machines and the way the cafe was always filled with chattering people.

Keegan delighted in the coffee shop atmosphere. She loved to sit for hours and take in the wide variety of people. She liked to amuse herself by trying to figure out if customers were human or supernatural creatures, and she made up full scenarios for strangers in her mind. Today, she eyed the tall shapely brunette behind her in line which Keegan had pegged a secret agent. And then there was the short pudgy guy with the horrible comb-over; she suspected he was an electrician who dreaded going home to his annoying family. Last but not least, the emo girl who hid in the corner with her face in a book. Something about her reminded Keegan of a fairy.

Looking around one last time before it was her turn at the counter, she noticed a sexy guy with dark, shaggy hair and piercing blue eyes watching her. Smirking to herself, she thought *vampire or werewolf*.

With her usual white chocolate mocha in hand, Keegan strolled over to her friends. Anna and Lauren were already sitting at the usual table with their drinks. They knew better than to expect her to be on time. She couldn't blame them.

Tilting her head, she gave a sly smile to the dark haired stranger as she passed.

Keegan took in the sight of her two best friends as they laughed together. She was still amazed that even with their different personalities they could be such incredible friends after so much time had passed. She thought for sure when they moved onto high school they would drift apart, but their relationship proved too strong for that.

Lauren looked gorgeous as usual with her long, dark curly hair, pale skin and her caramel colored eyes. She jumped up and grabbed Keegan in a hug which caused Keegan to spill her drink.

“I’m so excited to go to the fair! I’ve never had a psychic reading before.”

“Slow down,” Keegan said. “You just spilled the coffee all over me.”

“Whatever, you know you can’t make it through a cup of coffee without spilling it on yourself. You’re worse than a toddler.

Keegan laughed. “Good point.”

You couldn’t help but be taken in by Lauren’s positive attitude. She was always quick to smile and was the first to compliment someone. She purposely came across as not particularly bright. With her SAT scores, she could get into any college she wanted. Keegan had no idea why she downplayed her intelligence. She had once asked and Lauren said she didn’t want people to expect too much, and let them down. Keegan thought that was a ridiculous reason.

Lauren looked like a typical cheerleader with long legs and an athletic build, and she had the kind of wardrobe that made other girls jealous. For the fair, she had worn a knee length pink floral dress that oozed the runway look, and belted the gauzy material with a large brown belt that matched her ankle boots. She belonged in a Hollister ad.

As Keegan slid into her chair, Lauren looked at them expectantly. “Josh sent me this long love letter. He actually hand wrote it. Do you guys think he is getting too clingy?”

“Well, you have been dating over a year. It’s obviously pretty serious.” Anna rolled her eyes and took a sip of her drink. She had topped her black, long sleeve tee with a pink vest, and matching pink leggings under her black skirt. Today, her purple bangs hung from a lacy black beret.

Keegan was secretly jealous that Lauren had a steady boyfriend. “I think you should dump him,” she said. “There are so many hot guys you could date. You’ll be old and married before you know it. You might as well enjoy it now.”

“Keegan, just because you have dated half the school doesn’t mean everyone else has to,” Lauren retorted, poking her friend on the arm pointedly.

Keegan gave them a wicked grin. “There are just so many boys and so little time.” Anna laughed so hard she started hiccupping, which caused Lauren to spit her drink out. Keegan glanced up at Lauren to

make sure she wasn't choking. "You guys need serious help," Keegan laughed, handing Lauren a napkin to wipe the coffee off her chin.

Keegan could joke with the girls, but what no one knew was that she only had two years left to date. She would meet Rourk, her chosen, when she turned eighteen, and she was convinced he would be perfect for her. If only the rest of the world believed as elves did, Keegan was sure the divorce rate would be much lower. A kick under the table brought Keegan back to the present. "Ow!"

"Shh, you're such an idiot sometimes." Anna jerked her head towards the door. Keegan glanced casually around to see what the kick had been for. It didn't take a genius to figure out what Anna wanted her to look at. Wow. The guy they ogled was beyond hot even though he was older. He stood over six feet tall and his dark black hair looked like he had just got caught in a windstorm. His eyes were a striking blue and she swore he could see into her soul as his eyes caught hers. Way too hot to be a human. Keegan wondered if he was a sorcerer. Everyone seemed to be under his spell the moment he walked through the door. They all tried not to stare. Lauren fanned herself, causing them all to laugh.

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From outside the coffee shop Rourk stood hidden, watching Keegan through the window as she sat laughing with her friends. Her fleeting thoughts had summoned him again, and his pulse quickened as he felt the urge to go inside. He needed to be close to her.

Pushing a hand agitatedly through his shaggy hair, Rourk tried to focus on breathing. He leaned against the brick wall of the store behind him, rubbing his temples with both hands. The urge to speak to her made his heart ache. It took everything he had to remain rooted to the sidewalk, hidden in the shadows of a storefront while she was so close. He was left to watch from a distance as usual. She laughed at something one of her friends said and he wondered what her laugh sounded like.

Suddenly, they gathered their things and left the coffee shop; Rourk made a snap decision to follow them.

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The girls decided to walk to the fair instead of taking Laurens car. The weather was perfect, pleasantly cool, and there wasn't a rain cloud in sight. The fresh air felt incredible against her skin. Keegan closed her

eyes, tilted her head towards the sun and spun in a circle. “Fall is my favorite time of year,” she said wistfully.

Lauren shook her head smiling. “Earth to Keegan, we are talking about the fair.”

“Do you think they will let me know something about Xavier?” Anna wondered out loud, completely ignoring her friends’ ramblings.

“Maybe, but I think you have to ask about him. At least that’s how it goes on the TV shows.” Lauren glanced over at Keegan, swinging her small purse at her side as they walked. “What do you think?”

“I’m not sure. You would think if they were real psychics they would see it without being asked,” Keegan answered honestly.

“Good point,” Anna said. “I don’t think I will mention him. Besides, it’s bad enough he makes it obvious he only thinks of me as a friend. I don’t think I could handle psychic rejection as well.”

Lauren clapped her hands and jumped around. “EEK, we’re almost there! This is so exciting!”

Keegan was surprised at Lauren’s enthusiasm. The fair didn’t quite sound like her thing. She was probably hoping someone was going to tell her that she and Josh would be married, have three kids, and live happily ever after.

The fair was disappointing at first glance. Keegan had been expecting...well, she wasn't sure exactly what, but it looked like some boring craft fair in a church basement. A few tables and stands were arranged around the room with a bunch of old people seated at them. It didn't look like the few attendees milling around the place were actually buying anything. Still, she could hear her mother in her head. *Don't judge a book by its cover, Keegan.* She decided she might as well relax and try to have fun with her friends.

Keegan noticed a large red sign at the entrance of the fair that said NO PHOTOGRAPHY. Mumbling under her breath, she put her camera back in the bag.

They stopped at each stand, admiring the jewelry, crystals, tarot cards, and many other items available. There were certainly some fascinating things. Keegan picked up a moonstone necklace for her mother. The small sign next to it said it would bring considerable fortune. Keegan also knew it was a healing stone. It was one of her

favorites. She loved the way you could see the colors through it when it was held to the light.

Lauren came to a halt in front of a stand where a woman sat behind a table, dressed like a stereotypical fortuneteller. She was slightly overweight, fortyish, and wearing a multi-colored dress that gave her an outrageous gypsy appearance. She had a kind face. Her long curly hair was a brilliant red like that of a clown's nose. Gesturing to a pile of rocks on the table, she told Lauren, "Pick one and hand it to me. I can tell your future."

Lauren did so. When the woman had the rock, she closed her eyes and ran her small hands around it for a few moments before looking up at Lauren with a warm smile.

"You will do great things and succeed in whatever you put your mind to. I also see that you should put your focus into law."

Lauren's mouth gaped open; her dream was to be a lawyer. The girls all looked at each other in disbelief.

Anna jumped up and down yelling, "Me next!" She grabbed a rock and the woman did the same thing, closing her eyes and feeling the rock. "Child, you have a beautiful soul but you will struggle in life if you do not let go of the sadness inside of you."

Keegan and Lauren glanced over at Anna, surprised to see her brush away a tear. "Thank you," she said quietly, and put the rock in her pocket.

Finally, it was Keegan's turn. Placing her hands over the pile of rocks, she grasped the one that was calling to her and handed it to the woman. The woman kept her eyes closed for an extremely long time. When she finally opened them, she looked at Keegan warily. Keegan's heart started to race. She felt as if the woman knew she wasn't human and was going to say so.

The woman sighed, handing the rock back to her. "I'm sorry, I feel nothing."

"What do you mean you feel nothing?" Keegan balked at the woman.

"That's just how it works sometimes. I'm sorry." She shrugged.

Keegan wanted to ask the psychic some questions, but Anna and Lauren were keen to move on and dragged Keegan to the next stand. She



turned to look back and the woman returned her stare with a blank look. Keegan thought for sure something wasn't quite right. *Could she possibly know her elfin secret?* Maybe she truly was unreadable and that's why the woman looked at her strangely. It seemed odd, not to mention disappointing. Keegan wanted to hear what the psychic had to say about her.

The three girls spent hours browsing, which turned out to be a lot of fun. The crowd steadily built in the room so that it no longer looked sad and unused, but with the dim light and the noise of guests, it felt like a fair. After enough time had passed, and Keegan's feet were starting to hurt, she yawned and stretched dramatically.

"Are you guys ready to go?" she asked, tugging at Anna's sleeve.

Lauren nodded vehemently. "I shouldn't have worn these boots. I'm exhausted."

Though she done well hiding it for most of the day, Anna had obviously been shaken by the psychic's words. She just shrugged. "Sure, let's go get dinner."

As they walked towards the door, Keegan sensed someone watching her. She glanced around the room, searching for the source of the feeling, and was startled to come face to face with another elf.

Elves can recognize each other when they happen to cross paths. Unless of course it's your chosen, they are cloaked from each other by magic. Keegan had never seen anything quite like this elf. The girl was stunningly beautiful, but that was not a surprise as all elves tend to be overly attractive. She had short black hair, pale skin, rosy cheeks and the greenest eyes Keegan had ever seen on a person. She felt as if she were staring into the eyes of a cat.

What took Keegan by surprise was the darkness around the stranger. Keegan had heard of dark elves. Wherever there was light there had to be dark, but knowing something in your mind and actually seeing it is different. This was the first time she had seen a dark elf with her own eyes. She had heard they mainly lived up north and rarely made efforts to be a part of the human world like the light elves. Since her childhood, they'd almost felt like specters; boogeymen told through light elves' folklore. Keegan's body felt cold. She tensed up and all her senses heightened as her eyes were caught by the stranger's.

“Do you know her?” Anna asked.

Keegan couldn't talk. She felt as if their eyes were locked and she was unable to move unless the girl allowed it. Finally, the dark elf averted her gaze and Keegan's body relaxed. A distracted look crossed her face and she replied, “She looked familiar, but let's get out of here.” Keegan's only desire in that moment was to rush home and talk to her mother about what had happened.

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From a distance, Rourk was staring with a grim expression on his handsome face.

*What was that exchange all about and who was the dark elf?*

He had to make a choice. He could continue to follow the girls or go inside and talk to the dark elf. As much as it pained him to watch Keegan walk away, he quickly advanced into the building. He needed to know if she was in danger.

Rourk scanned the room, but he did not see the dark elf anywhere. *Where could she have gone?* Closing his eyes, he breathed deeply as he felt the coldness wash over him. He saw her with his mind's eye. The dark elf had taken the back door and was walking casually down the alley. It was times like this when he was grateful to be a descendent of a great warrior. He'd trained his whole life for his calling—from the time he got out of bed in the morning until the time he went to sleep at night. Hell, he even dreamed about the techniques he'd learned. He needed to put them to good use.

Silently he advanced. He was now the hunter, and she, his prey.

## CHAPTER 3

Keegan tried not to think about what had just happened and planted a smile on her face. “I’m starving! Isn’t it Lauren’s turn to pick?” She turned to Anna and at the same time they yelled, “Wendy’s!”

“Funny guys. I don’t always choose Wendy’s.” Lauren pouted.

Keegan and Anna exchanged a glance. Anna asked, “Name one time you didn’t pick Wendy’s?”

Lauren paused, and thought about it for a moment. “Fine, you are right. I love Wendy’s. If I had to choose my last supper it would be a Jr. Bacon Cheeseburger, fries, and a frosty.”

Shaking her head, Keegan put her arms through theirs and dragged them down the street. She was grateful for the distraction, but in the back of her mind she was still thinking about the dark elf and what seeing her could have meant.

Once they got to Wendy’s Keegan went with a frosty and a baked potato.

“I still don’t get this whole vegetarian thing you are going through,” Lauren told her, wrinkling her nose at Keegan’s baked potato.

Keegan reached across and grabbed one of Lauren’s fries and dipped it in her frosty. “I just suddenly got creeped out by eating animals. I want to help animals, not eat them.” Anna and Lauren both rolled their eyes. Keegan was always going on crusade for something.

Keegan genuinely wanted to ask Anna about what the psychic had said about her sadness, but figured if she wanted to talk about it she would. Lauren, on the other hand, was not quite as tactful. She blurted out, “Anna, you have to tell us what is going on with you. Are you really sad?”

Anna tilted her face down so that her purple bangs hung over her eyes. She didn’t say anything.

Seeing Anna’s hesitation, Keegan reached over to touch Anna’s hand and said, “If you don’t want to talk about it, we understand.”

Lauren butted in. “No, it’s not okay. She’s our best friend. If we can help, we need to know.”

“I’ve wanted to talk to you guys,” Anna said softly, looking down at her hands clasped in her lap. “I just didn’t know how to bring it up. My parents are getting a divorce.”

“What?” Lauren was genuinely shocked.

“They have been fighting for years,” Anna told them, finally looking up at them. “I’m kinda relieved. I know they’ll be happier apart. My dad has a drinking problem. He’s such a jerk to everyone. I hate the way he talks to my mom. She’s even on medication for depression.”

Lauren jumped up and ran around the table pulling Anna out of her seat. She wrapped her arms around her, “It will be okay. I just wish you told us sooner.”

Keegan got to her feet and joined in the group hug. “Don’t keep secrets from us anymore, okay?”

Anna smiled. “I’ll try not to.”

*As if I have room to talk,* Keegan thought as they all returned to their seats.

Keegan moved her iPhone around the table as she spoke. “I really had no clue. Your family always seems so happy when they’re out in public.”

Anna met her eyes across the table. “I guess you never really know what goes on behind closed doors.”

*Ain’t that the truth—if only they knew they were sitting across from a magical elf.*

“I’m worried about my sister,” Anna said. “I don’t think she’s going to handle it well at all. She’s quite a daddy’s girl.”

A mischievous grin crossed Lauren’s face. “Okay, enough negative thoughts for one day. We are going to Patrick’s party tomorrow night, right?”

Anna smiled. “Yeah, why not? At least I’ll be able to see Xavier.”

Keegan laughed. “Patrick is super cute.”

Lauren looked at Keegan in disbelief. “He’s also obnoxious as hell. You have the strangest taste.”

“Blah, blah, blah who cares. I didn’t say I wanted to marry the guy,” Keegan responded, waving off Lauren’s comment.

“Good point. What are you guys wearing?” Anna asked.

“We’ll figure out later what to wear,” Lauren said. “What’s the theme this time?”

“Dress to the nines.” Anna sounded slightly annoyed.

“Oh, that will be fun. We can all dress up. I needed an excuse to buy a new dress.” Lauren glanced over at Keegan. “You know what that means?”

“Shopping!” they replied in unison. Anna looked at them as if they were crazy.

After they finished eating, they walked back to Starbucks where Lauren had parked her car. Keegan unchained her bike from the bike rack in front of the cafe and the three of them managed to shove it in Lauren’s trunk, though the back tire juttled out. They took Anna home first, and then Lauren dropped Keegan off at her place, helping her unload her bicycle and roll it in the garage.

She pushed the heavy door open and walked in the house with her shoulders slumped, letting out a big sigh as she found her mother in the kitchen.

Mom looked up from her cup of tea, her blue eyes big under her cap of ginger-colored, pixie cut hair. She had a hardback book laid flat on the table, one small hand holding it open, the other holding her tea. She frowned and asked, “What’s bothering you?”

Keegan pulled out the stool next to her mom and sat down, letting her head rest in her hands. “My day was weird. I wanted to talk to you about it.”

She filled her mother in on all the details from what had happened at the fair to learning about Anna’s parents’ divorce. She ended with a request to give Anna’s mother a healing.

Her mother’s response took her by surprise. “Keegan, how could you have gone to a place with psychics without telling me?”

“Mom, it was just for fun. I didn’t think anything of it. Anna was so excited.”

Her mother sighed, a worried look crossing her face. “You have no idea the trouble this could bring us.”

Confused, Keegan asked, “Do you mean because of the dark elf?”

With a worried look still on her face, her mother said, “This is much bigger than you can understand. Once your father gets home we’ll have your grandmother come over and then decide what to do.”

Her mother jumped up and made some phone calls.

It wasn’t like her mom to be so cryptic. Keegan shivered, brushing the feeling away. She didn’t understand what was going on, but she hoped that her mom was just overreacting. Grabbing her iPad, she went up to her room.

She decided to do some research on dark elves and was surprised at how much information there was on Google. Obviously, most of the information was incorrect. The dark elf didn’t seem bothered that she was out during the day, and she was far from ugly. Most humans would be shocked if they knew the extent of supernatural beings that blended into their world each day.

Before the front door had even opened, Keegan knew her father was home. After the reaction her mother gave her, his presence made her feel a little apprehensive.

A few minutes later, she heard her grandmother arrived, the soft mumble of her voice drifting to her room. Her father’s voiced boomed up the stairs, “Family meeting!”

Keegan dragged herself from her desk chair and headed down the hall. Thaddeus glared at her as she passed his open doorway. He was sitting on the floor in front of his television, game controller in hand. “Are you kidding me, Keegan! What have you done this time? I’m in the middle of a game.”

Keegan stopped, leaning on the doorjamb and sighing. “Just get downstairs. You know how dad gets if he thinks we’re not listening to him.”

He reached over, grumbling under his breath, and turned off the Xbox. “This better be good.”

“I thought you knew everything,” Keegan teased as they started down the hall, ruffling her hand in her brother’s soft auburn hair. Though he was four years younger than her, he was quickly catching up to her in height.

“Shut up. You know that’s not how it works,” he responded, ducking away from her grasp.

They headed down the stairs as if they were marching to their death. Unplanned family meetings were generally not a good thing.

Warrick was sitting in the corner building towers out of his brightly colored blocks. Keegan envied the fact he was excused from family meetings because of his age. No one knew yet what his power would be. He was not yet two, but one glimpse into his inquisitive eyes revealed that he seemed to understand more than an infant could at his age. He babbled happily at her as she passed, so she gave him a quick kiss on the top of head.

Her mother and father sat on one side of the table, with her grandmother, Mary, seated quietly on the other side in her pressed khaki slacks and blue cardigan sweater.

Grandmother was a tiny woman with bright red hair, clear blue eyes, and youthful looks, thanks to her healing abilities. Her round, rosy face was always kind and usually smiling, but she looked more somber than Keegan could ever remember seeing her.

Keegan's father liked things to be organized and official. His stocky body seemed to nearly take up the entire kitchen as he seated himself in his favorite armchair and gazed sternly at Keegan from across the table. "We have called this family meeting to deal with the consequences of Keegan's actions."

His blatant mention of her name made her flush with anger. "Excuse me? Consequences of my actions? All I did was go out with my friends. Why are you all making such a big deal out of this?" Keegan yelled.

Her grandmother placed a warm hand over hers, shooting Richard a look to be silent. "There are things that you don't know and we were hoping we had more time to teach you. We wanted to let you guys be kids and not learn about the difficulties that come with our kind."

As if on cue Warrick toppled his blocks and filled the house with laughter. Turning her wise eyes back to Keegan, Mary continued, "Do you even know what your father does?"

Keegan glanced at her father. Richard's stern eyes were watching her silently, his large, muscular arms crossed over his chest. The scars that pockmarked his skin had always been there. "I know he was in the military and fought in many wars."

“Yes, that is true but he serves a greater purpose than that,” her grandmother explained, shooting a soothing smile to Keegan’s father.

Still confused, Keegan asked, “How is that possible?”

Her grandmother closed her eyes and when she reopened them she began, “There is a war. It has been going on since the beginning of time. Great care has been taken to shield it from the eyes of humans. It is the war of dark and light. Your father is the chosen one; the one who will lead us in the great battle. We have reached a tipping point and it’s unknown who will win in the end.”

“Why are we even fighting?”

Emerald and Richard exchanged glances with Mary. Emerald sat forward, reaching across the table for her daughter’s hand. Feeling a little weird, Keegan took her mom’s hand with her free one, her grandmother still holding the other. They were acting like someone had died.

“Keegan, it’s a fight that began thousands of years ago. The two sides didn’t always hate each other. We once lived together in peace. However, there was a falling out by a single ruling family over a land dispute that led to a splintering of the two sides. As strong emotions can often do, the hatred has only built more as time has passed.” Her mother smiled sadly. “The battle has been coming for a long time. There is nothing we can do to stop it.”

Keegan looked over at her brother Thaddeus. “Shouldn’t he be able to tell us something?”

Thaddeus shook his head.

Although her brother was only twelve, he was one of the most powerful seers their kind had ever known; and he was only just beginning to come into his powers. It was always hard for her to believe that her brother, the same one who drove her crazy and lived on his Xbox, could see the future. She believed that was the reason he’d become so antisocial and preferred friends that were digital; with the exception of Sam, another elf with whom he’d been best friends with forever. It was overwhelming for Thaddeus to be around people. He had not yet gained the ability to block his gift, and as such, he was forced to see all the good, and all the terrible, things that would happen.



Her grandmother picked up the conversation. “He cannot see it because it has not been determined yet.”

“Well, then we still have a chance. What does my visit to the fair have to do with this?”

“Keegan, most of the people that go to those fairs are fakes and are in it for the money. On rare occasions, however, they are the real deal and possess true gifts. As you know, people do not always use their gifts for positive reasons. Going to a place like that could have given the dark elves an opportunity to find out more about us.”

Her grandmother leaned back in her chair and ran her hand across the green linen tablecloth on the table next to her. Without saying a word, Emerald stood to get her some more tea.

“You said that you couldn’t move when the girl made eye contact with you. Do you know why you couldn’t move? She was going through your mind and you didn’t even know it. Thankfully, you didn’t know anything of use to her.”

Still feeling defensive, Keegan asked, “Why are you telling me about this now?”

With a soothing voice, her grandmother replied, “Because the time is growing near, and we need our family to be prepared.” She gave Emerald a silent thank-you with her eyes as a steaming mug was placed in front of her.

Her parents were sat close together across the table, holding hands. Mother looked worried and her father looked determined. Being her usual self, Keegan didn’t see what everyone was so worked up about. So a war was going on which had been going on forever. They were powerful elves, and there were more of their kind. Not to mention all the other supernatural beings that were on the side of light. She honestly didn’t think they had anything to worry about.

“Has everyone said all you have to say because if so I’d like to go to my room,” Keegan said.

Her father slammed his fist on the table, startling Warrick who immediately began to cry. Emerald rushed to his side as her father snarled, “Damn it Keegan! You need to take this seriously. We are talking about losing our entire race. Do you want us to become extinct?”

This threw her for a loop. “Extinct? What do you mean?”

“I mean, if we do not win this we will all be erased and evil will take over. Is that what you want?” He looked like an avenging god, as if he should be holding a lightning bolt, preparing to smite his enemies.

They had her attention. She hadn't even met Rourk yet, and she was greatly looking forward to her future with him. “I'm sorry.”

“There is something else you need to know, my love,” Mary went on. Keegan looked contritely away from her dad, giving her attention to her grandmother. “The Book of Elfin prophecy specifically mentions a child of the light who will be born with the gift of sight. A child whose father will lead the elves in battle.”

Keegan glanced back to her father. He nodded, taking a deep breath and letting it out before speaking, “A child who could save our people from extinction.”

“Who?”

“Me,” Thaddeus answered, so softly Keegan almost didn't hear him.

She let go of her grandmother's hand, falling back in her seat, stunned. “Oh.”

There was silence for a long moment as her family let the information sink in.

Keegan rallied herself, even though her heart was beating like a hummingbird's wings. She had no idea what to say. “Okay. Tell me what you would like me to do.”

Looking over at his daughter thankfully, Richard drew a deep breath. “For starters, we need to work on your fighting skills. Your brother is more than capable. You, on the other hand, need some work.”

Glaring at her brother across the table, he smirked back at her. Their father caught the exchange, “Not so fast, son,” he said. “You are going to be the one to train her.”

His reaction was priceless. A look of disbelief came over his face it was quickly replaced with the same look her father had whenever he was given a task, Keegan knew she was in trouble. Training with Thaddeus would be grueling. He'd take no pity on her. Her brother was considered rare. It was not often that an elf had two main powers. Keegan's father had come from a long line of warriors. It was almost impossible for him not to pass that on to his son. However, along with his gift of strength that was not just physical but also mental; Thaddeus was also a seer.

This was only known to have happened one other time in their history. Usually seers were weak and needed to be taken care of. That wasn't the case with Thaddeus. His two gifts made for a deadly combination.

As if her father had thought the same thing, he continued, "Thaddeus, you need to work on protecting yourself. I will have your mother work with you."

Her mother spoke up, "We do not expect you to give up your lives. We just want you to take your spare time to sharpen your skills. You also need to be more aware. Creatures of the dark will start showing up more often the closer we get."

Keegan hugged her grandmother, said goodnight to everyone else and went up to her room. She felt mentally exhausted as she grabbed her phone and fell back on the bed. Five texts waited for her. Anna asked what she was going to wear to the party. Lauren wondered if Josh could come with her to the party and Donald wanted to know if she wanted to go to the movies with him, Spencer, Sam and Calvron. This brought a smile to her face. She really liked Donald; too bad he didn't feel the same. Oh well, there was always Patrick who had sent her two texts. Apparently, he heard she was coming to the party. News traveled fast. She didn't bother to reply; she had too much running through her head.

Hopefully, her parents were overreacting with all the talk of a great battle. She laid in bed and thought about that for awhile. What if they really did become extinct and she never got to meet Rourk? She had their whole life planned out! She'd been dreaming of meeting her chosen since she was a little girl.

With all her thoughts muddled and swirling through her mind, Keegan eventually drifted off to sleep.

## CHAPTER 4

Rourk tensed as Keegan thought his name but quickly pushed it away; he had other things to deal with at the moment. This dark elf had been properly trained and had evaded him so far. He sensed her movement and knew she was to the right of him, but he continued to look straight ahead, knowing if he looked to the right she would be gone. He tried his best to seem completely baffled as if he couldn't figure out where she might be.

Thinking he'd lost sight of her, the dark elf moved forward. Rourk pounced. She might have been well trained, but he was gifted and she didn't stand a chance. For good measure, he shielded his mind as he threw her against the wall. She looked annoyed because she could not use her gift on him.

Rourk asked, "What do you want with the girl?"

The dark elf glared back at him. "I want nothing from her. I just happened to notice another elf and wanted to read her mind."

He pushed his forearm deep into her throat, "What were you doing at the fair?" he growled as the dark elf struggled under his grasp.

She flinched as she looked into his grey eyes. "I was just having fun. I was bored and I like messing with humans."

Rourk searched her face and decided she was telling the truth. Relaxing his grip, he stared into her eyes. "Make no mistake. If you go near the girl again, I will kill you."

She shrugged her shoulders. "Whatever, I have no interest in the girl."

Rourk sensed she was trying to look calm but could tell she was visibly shaken.

"She is lucky."

"What?" Rourk asked.

"Lucky to have someone who cares so much for her." Looking down at her black leather Converse, she scuffed her foot against the concrete.

"Just get out of here," Rourk sighed.

He watched the dark elf walk down the alley. She turned once to look at him and then hurried on. Watching the girl disappear around the corner, he hoped his chosen one had made it home safely.

He closed his eyes to check on her and saw she was home. A rush of relief filled his body. The constant worrying could stop for the night. He headed home.

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Keegan was lying in bed asleep when someone knocked on the door. Sitting up, she rubbed her eyes, and called, "Come in."

Her mom stuck her head in and smiled. "Hey."

Keegan grinned back, running her hands back through her hair. "Hey, Mom."

Emerald walked in, pulling the door to behind her, and propped on the edge of the bed. Staring at her daughter, she pushed a strand of her hair out of her face, her blue eyes searching. "What are you thinking about?"

Keegan glanced up at her mother sheepishly. "Rourk."

A smile crossed her mom's face as obviously recalled the days when she used to dream about her own chosen partner. "You'll meet him soon enough."

Sighing, Keegan said, "It seems to be taking forever. Why do I have to wait until I'm eighteen?"

"You know why. For now, just focus on enjoying your high school years. Have fun with your friends. Be a teenager."

Keegan knew it was an argument she couldn't win. So instead, she snuggled against her mom's side and asked, "Will you tell me the story of how you met dad?"

Her mother's blue eyes lit up. She climbed in closer to Keegan and put her arm around her daughter, then started, "As you know, it's forbidden for us to meet our partners before we're both of age. Your father was much older than me, so he had to wait longer than most."

Keegan watched her mother's face as she spoke. She loved hearing this story because it took away any doubt or fear she had about meeting Rourk.

Her mother continued, "I needed a new book, so I went to the bookstore. First I decided that a coffee sounded like a good idea. As I

was fixing my coffee, I looked up and made eye contact with a man. I was so taken back by my physical reaction to him that I almost spilled my coffee. I left quickly, forgetting all about my book.”

Keegan asked the same question she always asked, “Why did you leave?”

A slight smile appeared on her mother’s lips. “I felt guilty. I knew I was promised to a man I was going to meet in three months. I shouldn’t have been so instantly drawn to another.”

Keegan sat up a little on the bed, as if to hear the rest of the story a little better.

“I walked as swiftly as I could, knowing someone was behind me. I willed myself not to look back. I thought surely it couldn’t be him. He followed me the whole way down the mall. Once I reached the end, I had to turn around. He planted himself in front of me. His legs were spread more than shoulder width apart and his hands were in his pockets. I thought, ‘who does this man think he is following me, and why is he acting so arrogantly?’”

Continuing after a brief pause, she said, “He asked me if I would like to go out with him. I said no. He was so confident though that he gave me his number and told me to call when I changed my mind.”

Keegan loved that part of the story because she could imagine it clearly. Emerald’s face was luminous, her eyes in the past.

“I looked at the number often but resisted the urge to call him. I was really upset with myself because I could not get this stranger out of my thoughts. I was so nervous when the time came to meet your father. I was worried I would not be attracted to him or that we would have nothing in common. You can imagine my surprise when I came face to face with the arrogant stranger.”

“And neither of you had any idea that the stranger you had met at the mall was your chosen?” Keegan asked, not needing an answer because she already knew.

Emerald laughed. “Nope, we didn’t know at all!”

Looking up, her cheek resting against her mother’s shoulder, Keegan said, “I hope Rourk and I will be as happy as you and dad.”

Her mom slid from the bed, her warmth leaving Keegan’s side. She reached over and pulled the blanket up as she had done many times

when Keegan was a child. “That is the beauty of our kind. You will be. He’s meant for you.”

Keegan grabbed her pillow and tucked her arm under it, then rolled to her side. “Do you think Rourk will get me a ruby engagement ring?”

Her mother laughed, “I guess we will have to wait and see.”

Another sign that her parents belonged together was her mother’s engagement ring. Her mother had an unusual name, even for an elfin—Emerald. The day they met he handed her a box that contained a stunning antique emerald engagement ring. He said when he saw it he knew it was for her, and at the time, he wasn’t even aware of her name.

Ever since Keegan was a little girl, she had dreamed of her wedding day. One thing she knew for sure was she wanted a ruby engagement ring with diamonds on the sides in an antique setting. She hoped Rourk wouldn’t mind. He probably intended on giving her a diamond like everyone else.

But, maybe not. Maybe he would know exactly what she wanted. She was imagining scenarios of Rourk proposing to her as she drifted off to sleep.

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Keegan woke the next morning realizing she had slept like a rock. Just thinking this brought a smile to her face. She loved metaphors. Rocks don’t sleep, but were always charged with energy.

Remembering that tonight was the party at Patrick’s, she jumped out of bed and into the shower. Her brother banged on the door after some time and told her to stop singing. So she just sang even louder.

To pass time, Keegan walked through the woods, taking some more pictures and enjoying the sunshine. She knew it was just a matter of time until fall ended and winter crept in, making it too cold to be outside taking photographs.

She loved their land. Her parents had purchased the seventy acres of untamed wild before Keegan was born. It was mostly wooded and surrounded by farmland, so the seclusion was absolute. Her father’s security measures meant it was safe for her to wander freely. Even though she made fun of Thaddeus and Sam for spending so much time in the woods, she was guilty of it herself.

Keegan spent much of the afternoon lounging around her room with the television on while she chatted on Facebook with friends. All everybody could talk about was the party.

For dinner, Emerald made stir-fry, cooking a wok for Keegan with only vegetables, and piling a second wok with beef for Thaddeus and Richard. Her family's idle chitchat made her antsy; the day had seemed to drag on eternally.

Lauren and Anna showed up around seven to help her get ready for the party, toting make-up bags in their wake. She had to admit they both looked hot. Lauren was wearing a black and white polka dot strapless dress with a fuchsia sash tied at the waist. The short dress accented her long legs and the dark color was a stark contrast to her pale skin. Anna wore black skinny jeans with a gorgeous floral tunic that showed off her long neck. She refused to conform to the "dress to the nines" theme.

Keegan took a bunch of photos of them to post on Facebook and Tumblr later. With Anna's wildly colored make-up and Lauren's smoky eyes, they were made to be photographed.

Keegan decided on a green, one shoulder chiffon dress with black heels. She let Anna do her make-up but made her promise to not get too wild. Lauren put Keegan's hair up with loose curls falling down around her face.

"Your lips and eyes stand out even more than usual with your hair up," Lauren said, fluffing the curls around Keegan's face.

"Aw, thank you, but I think all the credit goes to you and your magical skills," Keegan responded, happy with the girl who was staring back at her in the mirror.

Lauren laughed, gesturing to herself dramatically. "I am quite magical."

Standing up, Keegan paused so Anna could run a blusher brush over Keegan's cheeks one last time.

"Anna, you should change into flats," Keegan said, frowning up at her friend. "You already tower over me as it is."

"Sure, blame me for your diminutive stature. If I didn't know any better, I would think you were secretly a pixie."

"As if!" Keegan laughed loudly.

Once they were all satisfied with their looks, it was time to go.



## CHAPTER 5

Initially they were going to take Lauren's car, but Keegan's father offered to drive them. Keegan didn't know if it was because he was worried they would drink or he just really wanted to do something for his daughter. He dropped them off, fashionably late, of course. By the time they arrived, the party was in full swing.

Patrick's house was in a big suburban neighborhood. It was a nice two story brick Colonial with lovely landscaping and enough space between the houses to justify a party. All the windows were alight and the solid *thump thump* of the music's bass could be heard from the sidewalk.

When they walked through the door the first thing they saw was Patrick, obviously drunk and with his arm around some blond chick. He saw the girls walk in and sauntered over to them, leaving the blond pouting.

"You guys are going to catch this house on fire," he said loudly, throwing his arms around Keegan and Lauren's necks. The blond chick did not appear to be thrilled by the statement, her glare speaking volumes down the hallway.

Lauren and Anna looked at Keegan who just rolled her eyes, grabbed them by their arms and pushed past Patrick. He was officially off her list.

The speed at which Lauren found Josh was astonishing. No sooner had they found the mass of the party dancing in the living room then the two of them were off making out in a corner.

The music was blaring too loud for conversation. The room smelled like liquor and sweat as partygoers rubbed against one another in the dimly lit room. One of Keegan's favorite songs came on, so she grabbed Anna and they went out and lost themselves on the dance floor.

Halfway through the song, Patrick danced his way onto the floor and screamed over the music, “Hey, I thought you were coming here to see me?”

Shooting him a disgusted look, Keegan turned away and pulled Anna further across the room. *Guys are such jerks.* She couldn’t wait until she turned 18 and didn’t have to deal with them any longer. She wondered what Rourk was doing at that very moment and whether he might have been at a party with a girl.

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*Why is she doing this to me?* Rourk moaned inwardly. She seemed to be thinking of him often these days. It was driving him crazy.

He was playing “Left for Dead” on his Xbox 360 and the urge to throw his controller at the wall was mindless. He tried to continue slaying zombies but couldn’t stay focused. Frustrated, he tossed down the controller and got to his feet, just like a puppy dog obeying its master. At least, that’s what he felt like.

He closed his eyes to get a grasp on where she was. He liked the hunt and tried to figure out her location from her surroundings. Grabbing his car keys, he headed for the truck and set off in search of her.

The house was so loud he could hear the music from a block away. Once he was in front of the house, he closed his eyes but didn’t like what he saw. *What is she doing at a place like this?* he thought. *There are so many drunk kids acting like fools, and she’s dancing like she doesn’t have a care in the world.*

Rourk watched as a blond kid approached Keegan. The kid was obviously drunk, and it appeared he was trying to get her to dance with him but she turned away. The kid grabbed her by the shoulder and turned her around, causing anger to surge up inside Rourk. When she pushed the kid away again, it was none too gently, and Rourk didn’t bother to suppress the smirk on his face.

Next, an orange-haired lanky boy approached her. She looked excited to see him. He started dancing with Keegan and her friends, but Rourk wasn’t sure if the kid was really dancing or just playing around; he looked like an imbecile. Unfortunately, he could tell Keegan liked the guy just from the look on her face.

His heart slammed in his chest and adrenaline raced through him. He couldn't stand the thought of Keegan having a crush on someone. There was no getting over the effect the girl had on him. Even with all his training, he was not prepared for the feelings she evoked in him. *Turn and leave*, he kept telling himself, but his legs wouldn't cooperate. He was captivated by her, and not just by her beauty; there was something more.

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Keegan was relieved to see Donald approach them. She was getting sick of Patrick constantly annoying her with his disgusting beer breath and too-friendly hands. She smiled as Donald danced up to her and Anna.

“Where did you learn to dance, Donald?” she said, trying to suppress the giggles his gyrating instilled in her.

He grinned broadly, his chest puffing out like a rooster as his hips shook. “On TV, I practice at home in front of the mirror.”

Keegan laughed. She never quite knew if he was being serious or just trying to make them laugh, but he was dancing like a crazy person and she seriously hoped he was messing around.

Keegan noticed Anna had left her for Xavier, and they were deep in conversation in the corner of the room. In the meantime, Spencer and Sam approached her and Donald and they all danced together.

Keegan yelled in Spencer's ear. “Does Donald know he dances like a crazy person?”

Spencer laughed, “The insane thing is he really thinks he's a good dancer.”

They glanced over at Donald; he had sweat pouring down his face. He was dancing away not paying attention to anyone. They all shook their heads and laughed.

The guys eventually moved on trying to flirt with other girls at the party.

Keegan felt left out. Lauren and Josh were still in the same spot, lips locked, while Anna was flirting relentlessly with Xavier on the couch. She wanted to leave, but knew she couldn't without the others. Gazing around at everyone, Keegan felt like they were all having more fun than her so she decided to go outside and get some fresh air.

Keegan stepped outside into the still night, wrapping her arms around herself for warmth. The porch was empty, the single lamp of the porchlight illuminating the white railing and the mismatched furniture. She leaned her elbows on the railing, taking a deep breath. Someone in the neighborhood had a fireplace going; the smell of burning wood filled the air. Keegan squinted out into the street, the light at her back inhibiting her from seeing very far, and noticed someone standing across the street. She couldn't make him out because of the glare from the street lights, but it was obviously a man. Instead of being chilled by a stranger watching her, she had an odd urge to walk over and talk to him, but she knew she couldn't do that; her father would kill her if she talked to a stranger in the middle of the night. *Why is he just standing there?* She wondered.

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Rourk couldn't believe it when she walked out the door. The light of the porch gave her a kind of halo as she gazed out across the street, her auburn hair like fire when lit from behind. She looked amazing in the dress she had chosen for the party; her bare shoulder was delicate and pale. When she kept looking in his direction, his heartbeat sped. It was the closest he'd ever been to her and he wondered why she was outside all alone by herself at night. Didn't she know it wasn't safe?

As if she could read his mind, Keegan turned around and went back inside the house. Thinking of the blond boy, Rourk thought maybe she would have been safer outside. *This is getting ridiculous*, he told himself. He needed to stay away from her. He couldn't keep stalking her for another two years. Rourk found some relief in knowing he would be 18 in less than a year and then he could follow in his father's footsteps and join the military. He needed to be away from her until it was time to meet—seeing her like this couldn't be healthy.

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The girls called Keegan's Aunt Katrina to pick them up. They each had a couple of drinks and Keegan didn't feel like listening to her parents' lectures. Plus, Aunt Kat was cool. She had an open-call policy. If they were ever in trouble or just needed a ride home, they could call anytime day or night. As long as they were not in danger, she would not

tell anyone's parents. Katrina was a terrible liar and Keegan was convinced her mom knew every time.

Kat was a mind reader so she always knew if the girls had done anything majorly bad. She pulled up in her dark green Subaru Outback and had Cash Cash blaring. The girls piled in the car, talking a mile a minute.

"I love picking you guys up," Aunt Kat said. "It reminds me of all my crazy times as a teen. Of course, you guys are mild compared to me and Keegan's mother."

The girls laughed, the three of them piled in the backseat together.

"I doubt my mom was all that crazy," Keegan said.

Kat smirked as she pulled away from the curb. "Oh, you'd be surprised."

"Tell us some stories."

"No way, I keep your secrets and I'll keep hers as well," Kat said sternly, her eyes twinkling at them in the rearview mirror.

Kat pulled into the driveway at Keegan's and said, "Hey Anna, maybe you should get it over with and put the moves on Xavier and see what happens."

Anna's mouth gaped open. "There is something funny about you, Kat. I was just thinking the same thing."

Kat just gave her a mysterious smile. "Get out of here. Have a good sleepover, and I'm glad you called. It makes my day when I can help you guys."

The girls blew kisses to her as they ran up the doorstep.

The next day everyone headed home at lunchtime. Keegan was already dreading the rest of the afternoon. Today would begin her training with her brother, and she was not looking forward to getting her butt kicked by a twelve-year-old.

## CHAPTER 6

They had trained as a family for as long as Keegan could remember. She just never took to it, which seemed to disappoint her parents. Unfortunately for her, now she had to focus and practice for real.

Thaddeus decided since she was rusty they should start with swords, her least favorite. Keegan tried to protest but knew it was useless, and being left-handed left her at a disadvantage in most things, not to mention her lack of coordination. Grabbing the training swords, they went over the same kata for what seemed like a thousand times. It was no more than drawing the sword, a single strike and re-sheathing it. At first, she was bored and just wanted it over with, but soon the movement became almost relaxing and the motion seemed fluid as her mind cleared.

“Keegan, we’re done,” Thaddeus said, leaning to pack away the tools they had worked with.

“Huh? We just started,” Keegan protested, the tip of her sword resting on the ground.

Thaddeus looked at her funny. “Check out the clock.”

Keegan was surprised when she looked at the clock and saw how much time had passed. It hadn’t felt like any at all.

Weeks passed between school, training, taking pictures, and hanging out with her friends and the time seemed to fly by. Her father was gone again. She had no idea where he went; just that he was gone for weeks and sometimes months at a time. Eventually, he showed up and often with a new scar.

Keegan walked through the door one day and saw her father sitting at the table in front of his MacBook.

“How was school?” he said, giving her a big smile through his beard.

Keegan tossed her backpack on the floor, crossing the kitchen to search for a drink in the fridge. “Same as usual, nothing too exciting.”

“Come have a chat with your old man.” He patted the table next to him.

“Dad, what do we have to talk about? I know you’re not going to tell me where you’ve been.” Keegan grinned, looking back at him over her shoulder with her face in the refrigerator.

“You would just think it was boring if I did.” Richard shrugged.

“Uh, huh. I’m sure a secret mission to save us from destruction would be boring. Do you want a drink?” She grabbed a couple of sodas and sat across from her dad.

"Your brother told me you are making great progress."

Trying to hide her surprise, she shrugged. "I don't really care what he thinks."

"Then why are you trying not to smile?"

She was quite amused at the sheer pleasure she felt from those simple words.

Keegan's mother came through the door, arms laden with bags of groceries. “Richard, would you mind getting the rest of the bags from the car?”

She looked frazzled. Keegan grabbed a dangerously listing bag from her before it hit the floor. "What's wrong?"

Her mother stared at her, raising an eyebrow as she put her bags on the kitchen table. "I still have so much to do and everyone is going to be here in two hours."

Taken aback, Keegan said, “Umm, everyone is going to be here for what?”

She looked at Keegan like she was an alien. “How could you forget today is your cousin Merrick’s birthday and the party is here?”

Richard came back through the door carrying several bags just in time to hear her mom’s declaration. By the look on his face, Keegan was pretty sure her father wished he’d stayed gone one more day. Her family was what could be called a handful. Soon they would be host to a house full of elves and all the mischief that came along with it.

Keegan’s mother busied herself in the kitchen making one of the few dishes everyone liked: meatball subs. Emerald liked making the dish because all she had to do was throw the meat in the crock pot add some sauce and heat up the bread. Keegan often wondered why her mother was a stay-at-home mom. She didn’t seem to enjoy any of the cooking,

the cleaning, the volunteering, or the homework. She could have easily gotten a job if she wanted but for whatever reason she chose not to.

It used to bother Keegan that her mother didn't use her healing power for good like her grandmother. Mary worked as a nurse so she was around sick people all the time. In her position, she had to be careful not to draw attention to herself so she rarely gave a full healing. She told Keegan that just removing some discomfort from her patients was often enough. Her family thought the patients sensed there was something different about her. She also received more thank you cards than any other nurse. Even the doctors asked for her when severe cases arrived.

Years before, Keegan had followed her mother around one day to see what she did with herself. Keegan drifted back to the day and recalled the memory. Using her power, she followed her with her mind's eye, which was prohibited by the family unless they felt someone was in danger. They were supposed to respect each other's privacy. Keegan had always been too curious for her own good.

Keegan watched as her mother went to the gym, the bookstore and then did some shopping. She gave up for a bit, and when she checked back in one last time what she saw made her proud to be her mother's daughter. It was dark and dingy, wherever Emerald was. Keegan saw a woman with three kids gathered around her mother. The woman had been severely beaten, with blood coming out of her mouth and a hunched over, on-the-brink-of-death feel. The kids looked terrified.

Emerald closed her eyes and a look of peace came over her face. She held her hands over the woman's body and right before Keegan's eyes the woman was healed. It was amazing to watch. After some time, the children calmed down. Finally, the woman grabbed her mother's hands and said thank you. Emerald told them to collect their things and say goodbye because they were not coming back to this life. She gave them money, a car, and the keys to a new place that was far away from their current surroundings.

Luckily, money was something Keegan's family never had to worry about. Her Uncle John's gift was analytical. He saw patterns in numbers which was basically like seeing the future in stocks and business ventures. Because of his gift, their family had always been well taken care of.



That night when her mother had walked through the door, she looked Keegan in the eye and said, "Now you know."

Her mother was hard to read at times. Keegan thought she was annoyed that she had invaded her privacy. She also felt her mom was glad she witnessed the healing.

Keegan had followed her mother to the kitchen where she was filling up a teapot which was something she always did whenever she walked through the door.

After a brief hesitation, Keegan asked, "Do you do that often?"

Her mom glanced over with a slight smile on her face. "Only when they are ready," she said. "I used to work at a women's shelter."

This surprised Keegan. She had no idea. "It was before you were born. I spent days and nights healing many poor women such as the one you witnessed today." Keegan raised an eyebrow.

"Well, why did you stop?"

As she grabbed the tea bags, she turned and faced Keegan. "I was there for years and eventually I realized I was not helping them. They usually went back to the abuser. I would give them a full healing and they would feel wonderful. Somehow, almost all of them managed to convince themselves that the abuser would change. Of course they never did, and the women would return to the shelter. I would heal them and the process would repeat itself. My gift was making me miserable. I could not understand how these women would take a fresh start and go back to their former lives. It was your father who helped me see what I needed to do. He told me to walk away. I was appalled, at first. How could I walk away from those in need? He explained that my gift was mine to use as I wanted. If working at the shelter was making me unhappy then it wasn't worth it. Those women were not willing to start over. He asked me to think back and find the common thread in the small percentage of women that took the opportunity at a new life. I realized there was something. Almost all had children who witnessed the abuse and they were a breath away from death."

Keegan had sat back, cup in hand, digesting what her mother had said. "How do you find out when they are ready?"

Her mother smiled sadly. "There is a network on the side of the light that wants to help the humans, a community that tracks these cases. We

have people that work in shelters or hospitals. There are also school teachers who see the signs of children that have been abused or live with abusive parents. Once in a while I get a call that my gift is needed.”

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Keegan’s mom tapped her on the shoulder which brought her back from her memory.

“Keegan, I told you to make sure the bathrooms were clean.”

Her mom always seemed so stressed out when they were having company; she wanted everything to be perfect. Not that anyone noticed or cared.

Keegan looked forward to having her family over. It was the only time the kids got to use their gifts around others. That was probably the hardest part of being an elfin child. Not to mention it was an excellent chance for her to use her camera.

Almost all family gatherings were at her house, which was more like a fortress than a house. It was a place where everyone could be themselves and not worry about neighbors. It sat on 70 acres of land and on either side it had farmland so there were no close neighbors to speak of. Most of the land was wooded. To get to the house you had to go through a gate and then the driveway that was long and winding. There was a massive stone fence that surrounded the property and even security cameras. The cameras were just a deterrent as their extra sensory elf abilities would let them know in advance if they were being attacked.

The house itself was not that large. A two story wooden house made mostly of glass. You could see out when standing inside but not when trying to look in from the outside. It was made of some kind of military grade glass. Her father said it was in case of severe storms, but they all knew better. Keegan’s favorite thing about the house was the ceiling to floor water fountain that separated the living room from the dining room. It was like a wall of rushing water. It made the whole house relaxing.

The property was pretty amazing. There were large rocks landscaped around the place. Her mother loved rocks of all kinds, and her brother liked to use them for free running. There were running trails that had sporadic workout stations for training woven around the land. They had

a huge shooting range set up that would make any soldier envious. To top it all off they had a stunning natural swimming pool and an underground shelter that could fit everyone, even the extended family. The shelter was stocked with enough supplies to last a year if they needed it, although they hoped they would never have to.

Aunt Brigid arrived first with Keegan's cousins, Keara and Jonathan. Of the three sisters, Brigid was the extravagant one. She had on True Religion jeans that cost over \$200 and a bright red low-plunging wrap shirt which Keegan was sure had to be a designer label. Not to mention her outrageously expensive purse to pull the outfit together. Brigid's husband worked a lot to keep her in the lap of luxury. Keegan loved shopping with her Aunt Brigid who liked any excuse to shop until she dropped, and she was always the life of the party. She could make anyone laugh.

Shortly after Brigid arrived, Katrina showed up with her two children, Merrick and Mackena. The first thing Katrina said was, "Nice shirt, Brigid."

Brigid said with a knowing glance down at her own chest, "Hey, these are bought and paid for. I need to flaunt them every chance I get."

Keegan could hear her mother laughing in the kitchen. *Let the chaos begin.*

Once all the kids arrived they wanted to play hide and seek. Of course this was not a fair game. Keegan always won. Even though they could all visualize the others in their mind, no one else could disappear at will. What could she say? They liked to play and she liked to win.

Warrick ran around giggling. He loved having other kids to play with.

Keegan enjoyed watching the kids use their gifts. Jonathan, who used telekinesis, moved things around to look for his sister. Merrick turned into a bunny and was hopping around with Mackena chasing after him.

No one was sure what Mack's gift would be. It usually wasn't evident until the age of five.

Keara was slightly different from the rest of the family. Usually elves only partnered with other elves. That was not the case with Brigid. She fell in love with a Warlock who was not her destined partner and Keara

was conceived. Keegan thought Keara felt out of place. She knew she wasn't quite like the other elves. Everyone else had pale skin and flushed cheeks. Not Keara. Her skin was a beautiful light mocha color with rosy cheeks showing through and pointy ears. They always tried to convince her how lucky she was, but she had yet to see it.

Keara could change the weather and turn on and off anything electrical, and that was just for now. As she aged, she would continue finding out more about her abilities. Unfortunately, her warlock father took off and was never heard from again and eventually Brigid agreed to meet her chosen mate and has been with him ever since.

Keegan's mom sounded off from the kitchen, "Kids come in to eat."  
"Mom, were not finished," Keegan groaned.  
"Now!"

The kids mumbled as they headed to the dining room where the complaining quickly came to an end. The food was delicious.

Keegan noticed her uncle had arrived and was in deep conversation with her dad. He was nicknamed Paul Bunyan for his incredible height and weight; over 200 pounds, which was quite large for an elf.

Keegan's grandmother finished icing the cake. It looked delicious. They sang *Happy Birthday* and Merrick tore through his toys, most of which he liked. He opened one and said, "Hey, I didn't ask—" and then stopped mid-sentence and said, "This is awesome! I've always wanted one."

They all looked over at Brigid whose gift was manipulating thoughts. She just shrugged her shoulders and smiled.

After the party was over and Keegan said goodnight, she headed up to her room to get ready for school the next day. She had a big test in physics. Math and science came easy to her, so she didn't need to study, although she was not even in the same ball park as her Uncle John when it came to numbers. There was something about science that drew her in, and it was like her mind worked differently than others. Teachers asked her to explain a problem, and she would get the correct answer, but often they had never thought of doing it her way. Sometimes they even thought she had cheated because Keegan finished so much quicker than others and didn't have to write out all the work to get the correct answer. She would sleep well because she knew she'd ace the test, easy.

## CHAPTER 7

Keegan smiled as she walked down the halls and saw her friends waiting for her. She attended a Catholic school, and other than the uniforms, she thought it was fantastic. She loved going to school, which was kind of odd for a teenager. School was a place where she felt normal around her human friends. All the girls managed to add some individuality to the uniforms with jewelry, makeup and hair accessories. Lately, she'd taken to adding a scarf to her uniform, and so far no one had told her to take it off. It was a fashion trend that she picked up during her time in Dubai with her family. They traveled a lot, at least twice a year and always took trips out of the country. Her parents wanted them to see there was more to the world than the United States.

Donald spotted her and thought, *Why does she have to be an elf?* He had no issue with the fact that she wasn't human. He wasn't human either. It drove him crazy, but he knew she could never return his feelings, not in the way he needed. Because she was an elf, she had an inability to feel deeply about anyone other than her chosen mate. They could date, but it would never lead anywhere. Last year, she had pursued him and he told her he only liked her as a friend. It was one of the hardest things he ever had to do. He couldn't justify putting himself through the pain of knowing he would be nothing more than a passing fancy so he settled on the next best thing, being her friend. He had to settle with that.

Taking another quick glance at Keegan out of the corner of his eye, he banged his head back against the front of his locker. He loved everything about her. She was funny, smart, friendly, confident, considerate, and clumsy, which was so cute, not to mention the fact that she was insanely beautiful. The room felt brighter the moment Keegan walked in. Ugh, he felt so corny just thinking about his feelings for her.

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Anna and Lauren had Keegan's locker open and were applying their makeup when she walked up.

"You guys really need to get your own mirror," Keegan said, rolling her eyes.

"There's no fun in that, and besides your mirror is magical or something. It makes us look amazing," Lauren said over her shoulder.

"Uh huh, I'm sure the \$5.99 Target mirror has magical properties."

Keegan pushed them aside to stow away her backpack, and looked at herself.

Through the mirror, Keegan could see Donald; he was so cute with his orange hair. He happened to look up at the same time and she saw his green eyes reflect back at her. She smiled at him, but he couldn't see. He closed his locker and turned away to joke around with the rest of his crew.

Donald, Sam, Spencer, and Calvron were inseparable. On the rare occasion they were caught by themselves, each one usually complained about the other. They were worse than women in a beauty shop.

Sam, who happened to be one of the hottest guys in school, threw a piece of paper across the aisle at her. Keegan tried to look cool by catching it, but of course she failed miserably. Anna picked up the crumbled paper and hit Spencer in the head which caused them all to laugh.

Keegan saw Katie timidly walking up to her. Katie was shy and had a hard time making friends, and even though the two of them had become quite close, Keegan had a feeling she still didn't feel like part of the gang.

"Did you finish your math homework?" Katie asked.

"Of course, this morning on the ride over here."

"I have no idea how you can do that," Katie said. "It takes me hours to do math work."

"Do you need any help?"

"Yes, but just on a couple of questions."

"No problem, I'll help you at the end of English class."

Keegan wondered what her friends would think if they found out what she was, but it was forbidden for her to reveal her secret. She imagined if she told them that they would look at her as if she were

some kind of freak. Humans seemed to fear magic and anything that was different from what they were used to.

Keegan aced her test, and the rest of the day went by in a blur. Her least favorite part of the day was gym class. She was always made fun of for her lack of coordination. Today, things felt different though, and even the coach noticed. They played soccer and not once did she trip and fall or miss the ball. For the first time ever, Keegan scored a goal, and she even had some decent blocks. Obviously, her training with Thaddeus was paying off. She felt strong and confident. Maybe her father was onto something when he said time and practice was the key to everything. It had certainly worked for Thaddeus.

While Keegan enjoyed high school, her brother was homeschooled. As a matter of fact, all elf children who were born to be warriors were taken out of school in the sixth grade. This allowed them to focus on their training, which included using their mind and becoming highly intelligent. Most of their training took place at a camp where they spent hours in the field learning the ways of a warrior, and then they completed their studies at home on their own. They spent countless hours reading and had a strong grasp of history. Her brother could recite books word for word, which was kind of creepy.

## CHAPTER 8

Rourk ran swiftly through the woods with his attacker closing in on him. He could hear his own heartbeat pounding in his head. Sweat poured down his face, and he felt pure joy. He lived for this kind of stuff. It was what he was born to do. He was leading his victim and it would all be over soon.

He loved the sound of branches cracking under his pursuer's feet. They were sloppy and needed to be reprimanded, which he would take care of once the chase was over.

Slowing down, Rourk took cover behind a large tree. He listened, and all he heard were the familiar sounds of nature; birds chirping, squirrels running, even the sound of a deer could be heard in the distance. What he was not hearing was the sound of footsteps. This brought a grin to his face. Perhaps he found a worthy opponent after all. He could take the easy way and close his eyes, if it weren't prohibited. He scanned quickly and saw nothing. *Think Rourk.* The woods were vast, but this was a game of cat and mouse. He could not be far. What surprised him the most was that there were no sounds of heavy breathing even though they'd been running for hours. Then, like a light bulb going off, he looked up. "You are a sly little devil," he said. Taking aim with his paint-gun, he fired. "Show yourself," he demanded.

The boy dropped nimbly from the tree and walked confidently up to Rourk, removing his paintball mask. Rourk was shocked by what he saw. He couldn't have been older than twelve. What perplexed him even more was the boy's eyes. They were the same clear blue-green as his chosen's, only this boy's looked older for some reason.

Rourk kept his face still; a warrior never gave away his thoughts by facial expressions when caught off guard.

"What is your name?" Rourk asked.

"My name is Thaddeus, and yours is Rourk."

Stunned, Rourk demanded, "How do you know my name?"

"You will someday be my brother-in-law," he stated, as if it were obvious.



“Why did you stop running and climb the tree?”

Thaddeus smiled, “I knew you were done playing and were about to capture me after you faked a fall.”

Speechless, Rourk just stared at him. Finally, he said, “So you’re the son of Richard. I have heard much about you. I’ll tell your father that he should be proud to have such a remarkable son. No student has ever come close to catching me.”

Thaddeus looked up at him. “I’ll get you next time,” and after a slight pause added, “probably,” with an impish grin.

Rourk laughed, unable to help himself. He wasn’t supposed to form relationships with his students, but he liked Thaddeus.

All at once, it dawned on him. The man who he looked up to the most was Keegan’s father, but how could that be? Richard had never treated him any differently than the others. Rourk was grateful he hadn’t learned of this when he was younger. Over the years, he’d proven himself to Richard without the added stress of trying to impress the man who would someday be his father-in-law.

“Have you told her anything about me?” Rourk asked softly.

He replied, “Only your name.”

“Why would you do that?”

“Someday she will be in danger, and that was the only way I could think of for you to save her.”

This rattled Rourk to the core. He knew better than to ask for more details even though he wanted to grab the boy and shake it out of him. He knew he couldn’t ask this of a seer. The fact that he told him as much as he did and allowed his sister the ability to pull him towards her when she needed help was unbelievable enough. Rourk looked him in the eyes and said, “Thank you, you have my word that I will do everything in my power to keep your sister safe. Can I ask you one thing?”

Thaddeus shrugged, eyeing Rourk with interest. “That depends.”

Meeting his eyes, Rourk asked, “What’s her name?”

Thaddeus laughed. “Her name is Keegan.”

Rourk said the name in his head a few times getting use to the sound of it.

“The name suits her,” Thaddeus said. “It means ‘little fiery one’.”

“Why am I pulled to her, but not her to me?”

“Magic, of course. Partners are cloaked from each other until they turn eighteen. I had yours removed.”

“How did you manage that?”

“That’s two questions, Rourk. You know I can’t disclose that information. But I will tell you this. Once it was known that I was the child in the prophecy, my reach was pretty much unlimited. I have at my disposal anything that could allow our race to live on.”

Rourk nodded his head at the boy in understanding.

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Keegan was walking out of school when her phone went off. She grabbed it and looked at the caller ID; it was her Aunt Kat.

“Hey, what’s up?” Keegan said.

Can you babysit tonight? Drew and I need a date night.”

“How could I say no to my favorite aunt?”

“Uh, huh. I thought Brigid was your favorite since she spoils you.”

“Fine then, it’s a tie.”

“Well, hopefully I will be your favorite after you see the present I got for you.”

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Later that evening, Katrina walked through the door with the biggest grin on her face. She was obviously rather proud of herself for something. “Guess which of your favorite aunts has four tickets to 30 Seconds to Mars?”

Keegan squealed with delight. The concert had been sold out for weeks.

“Just make sure to tell those girls that there will be no making out with their boyfriends on my watch.” Kat took them to many concerts, and the last time she got mad at Lauren for meeting up with Josh and making out most of the time. She’d said they had plenty of time for that on their own time.

Keegan called Anna and Lauren right away and had them all on the phone on a three way. “Kat just hooked us up with 30 Seconds to Mars tickets,” Keegan said.

She had to move the phone away from her ear when the other two girls started screaming. “I know, she’s the best. I have to go; I’m

watching Merrick and Mackenna tonight. We'll go over what we'll wear at school."

The girls said their goodbyes and Keegan turned to face Katrina.

"They say they love you and that you are the most amazing person in the world."

Kat smiled, causing her face to glow.

## CHAPTER 9

The next day, their father walked in while Thaddeus was training Keegan. They were in the middle of sprints and he yelled, “Vanish Keegan.”

She hesitated, which of course was a mistake. She hated to disappoint him.

He called them over and told Thaddeus he needed to work on her reaction skills. “She needs to be able to use her gift without hesitation no matter what her surroundings are,” he said.

Keegan hated when they talked about her like she wasn’t there.

“Keegan, you have a skill that any soldier would kill for, but it does you no good if you’re not able to use it when needed. If a knife is coming down on you, a bullet is fired, or someone is strangling you, you should be gone. Of course, it’s only to be used in a life or death situation, and until then you fight. We cannot give away our secret. If you went invisible in front of a human, it might draw some attention. However, if your life is at stake, you never hesitate.” She was about to say something about those scenarios being ridiculous, but the seriousness of his expression stopped her.

Her brother drilled her for hours after her dad left, and she didn’t feel as if she’d improved at all. Keegan had only used her gift for fun before, and it had always been at a leisurely pace. She wasn’t sure she was going to be able to do what her father wanted.

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Rourk sat in his room staring at the wall. His mind raced. *How had the boy even been assigned to him?* If Richard really was Keegan’s father, he’d want to keep them separated. The only logical explanation was they wanted him to know, maybe having faith in him that he could change the future. This made him sure there had to be some threat to Keegan that would lead to her death and that they were trying to intervene in the natural course of destiny. This was not something that was done lightly. It had to be happening soon because it was to be before

they were to meet. Could it be something to do with the great battle? Why else would they intervene?

Rourk didn't want to overstep his boundaries, but he had to talk to Richard. Once he reached the camp, he went directly into Richard's office.

When Richard saw Rourk, he broke into his easy smile. "I have been waiting for you," he said.

Rourk was always surprised how this man could put people at ease. It was one of the traits that made him an exceptional leader and the reason why men were so devoted to him.

"I wasn't sure if I should come talk to you or not. However, after going over it repeatedly, I had to. There is a flaw in this plan."

"There is a flaw in every plan, but we must make do with what we have."

Rourk asked, "Can I war game this out with you?"

Richard sighed, "Very well, I will hear you out."

War gaming was when they thought through the outcome of a mission beforehand, and it was a way to make sure they were aware of different possibilities and variables that could affect the outcome.

"I don't think this will work without Keegan being aware of the plan. How can we be certain that she will even think of me if she is in danger?"

This brought a loud laugh from Richard. "Son, you have a lot to learn about women. There are many flaws to our plan, but that is not one of them."

His reaction surprised Rourk. "How can you be so certain?"

Richard smiled. "As warriors, we do not fear death. We couldn't possibly do our job if we did. That's what makes us different from the others. All we wish in death is to die bravely. However, on every occasion that I have come close to death I have always thought of my wife. So you can imagine a sixteen-year-old would think of the one she has yet to meet."

Rourk stared at him trying to hide his astonishment. "I am to meet her before she turns 17?"

Richard put his hand on Rourke's shoulder. "This is why you're good enough for my daughter and the reason why I am relieving you of your training duties. Now your job is to protect my daughter."

## CHAPTER 10

Keegan walked outside and saw her mother swinging on the porch swing. She walked over and sat down next to her.

The day was another of sunshine, but the air held a chilly breeze. Emerald was wrapped in a brightly colored shawl, her feet planted firmly on the wooden boards of the porch as she swung.

“Mom, I keep thinking about Anna’s mother. I really think you should give her a healing.”

Emerald looked over at her daughter. Keegan had never asked her to give a healing before. “I guess I could call her. I think she’d be surprised though. It not like we talk on a regular basis.”

Keegan smiled and said, “Thanks, and try not to let on that Anna told you about it.”

“Well, that is going to be almost impossible Keegan. I’ll figure something out so Anna doesn’t get in trouble for confiding in you.”

After Keegan walked away, Emerald could not stop thinking about her conversation with her, and she felt the need to help Anna’s mother. Anna was one of Keegan’s best friends. If Anna’s mother were suffering, Anna would also be affected. She hesitated and then headed inside to the phone.

“Hello, Jennifer, I know this is unusual, but would you mind if I came over to visit?”

There was a brief silence; the woman was probably surprised. “Ah sure, of course, you can come over.”

A little while later, Emerald arrived at Jennifer’s house.

Anna’s parents lived modestly in a small stone ranch house not too far from Keegan’s own home. Jennifer was a tall, thin woman with dark circles under her brown eyes and her long brown hair pulled into a messy ponytail. She was dressed casually in jeans and a plain white t-shirt, pink flip flops on her long feet. She met Emerald at the door with a tentative smile.

When she walked in, Emerald decided not to beat around the bush.

“I overheard the girls talking and understand you have problems with depression.”

Jennifer was clearly uncomfortable. She looked down at her feet and said, “Why would Anna tell them that?”

Emerald reached out and put her hand on her shoulder. “There is nothing to be embarrassed about. I think I might be able to help you.” Emerald explained that she was a second degree reiki healer; that was how she explained her healing powers.

Jennifer seemed interested, and almost looked hopeful “It’s worth a shot at this point.”

Emerald said, “We’ll need a quiet place where you can lay down.”

Jennifer led her into the spare bedroom. It was a quiet room in the back of the house with soft blue walls and minimalist furniture—a twin bed with no headboard but a pretty floral quilt and a white chest of drawers holding a single vase of fresh roses. It was cool and dim.

“All you have to do is close your eyes and relax,” Emerald told her as Jennifer slid on to the bed. “You may or may not feel heat coming from my hands, but even if you don’t it will still work.”

With a serious nod, Jennifer settled against the pillow and closed her eyes.

“I’m going to turn on some relaxing music, and then we will start.” Emerald pulled her iPod from her back pocket and connected it to the small radio sitting on the bedside stand. The light sound of flutes and chimes filled the room.

Moving her hands over Jennifer’s body, Emerald quickly realized something was not right. Humans have a certain type of energy and Jennifer’s was not human. Still, Emerald gave her a complete healing.

Jennifer was amazed at how happy she felt afterwards. “I don’t recall feeling this normal in a long time. It’s as if a cloud has been lifted from my soul.”

Emerald knew exactly what she felt, because she could feel what the individual felt during a healing. Humans believed healers were drained after a healing which was far from the truth. Every time Emerald gave a healing, she felt as renewed as the person who received it. She almost felt selfish when using her gift on others because she received so much in return.



As she was walking out the door, Emerald handed Jennifer a St. Dymphna's medallion. "Have this with you always."

Grasping it in her hand, Jennifer said, "What is it for?"

Emerald was silent for a moment and then said, "She is the Saint of emotional and mental disorders, and the medallion will help ward off the depression."

Jennifer's eyes teared up. Already, the dark circles that had been under them were fading. She sniffed, brushing away a tear before it could fall. "Thank you. I can never repay you for this."

Emerald smiled. "There is nothing to repay. Please call me if you feel it is coming back."

Emerald was not sure what kind of creature she was, but she was certain Jennifer was on the side of the light. She also knew that there would be no need for her to call. During a full healing, all the blockages are removed and Jennifer would be the healthiest she had ever been in her life. The medallion had been energized with healing properties.

Jennifer shut the door and thought *Reiki my ass! That woman was gifted.* All these years and she had been clueless that they were not human. Whatever Emerald was, she now was in her debt. Jennifer had lost her will to live and had been walking around like a shell of a person. Now she felt energized and more alive than ever. Her husband would come home to a different woman. She wondered if it would be enough to save their marriage. She realized even if it wasn't, she would be fine. She was strong enough to be on her own. She should have known marrying a human would be bad for her soul. Jennifer debated asking Anna if she knew anything about Keegan's secret, but she decided against it. Ultimately it was Keegan's secret to keep.

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Keegan had a date tonight. A first date with a new boy in school. She had been surprised when Tom asked her out. He seemed quite shy. Looking through her closet, she tried to find an outfit that didn't make it look like she had tried too hard. She settled on a pair of skinny jeans and turquoise V-neck tee shirt. They were only going bowling after all.

Hearing the doorbell, she grabbed her sweater and walked down the stairs.

"I'll see you guys later," Keegan yelled across the room.

Her father yelled back, “Remember the number one rule of dating.”

Keegan rolled her eyes, “I’m not going to walk out if he places his back to the door, dad. Not everyone believes they need to be on high alert at all times.”

Richard appeared from the living and walking towards his daughter, he said, “If he’s not able or willing to protect you, he is not worth your time.” He kissed her on the head. “Have fun,” he said, “and don’t stay out too late.”

He stared at the door after it closed. It was hard to believe that she was so grown up. In his mind, he still pictured her as a little girl with pig tails begging for a ride on his shoulders. The memories brought a smile to his face.

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Rourk no longer had to wait for Keegan to think his name. She was his responsibility now. He watched as a truck pulled up and a tall guy with dark hair got out and went to the door. Keegan came out looking happy and was beautiful, as usual. The guy opened the door for her, and she grabbed his shoulder to pull herself up. Rourk felt a pang of jealousy.

Once they pulled out, he followed them at a distance. *Where were they going, and who was this guy?*

Eventually they pulled into the bowling alley. Rourk groaned. *You have to be kidding me.* He decided not to go in and watched her from the outside, using his mind.

As he watched her bowl, he laughed to himself and thought *she is a terrible bowler.* She barely hit any pins. She seemed to be enjoying herself though, perhaps a little too much, and he saw her touch her date’s arm a couple of times. The kid got a strike and she hugged him. Rourk clenched his jaw. Noticing this, he made himself relax.

A couple of hours later, the kid drove Keegan straight back to her house. Rourk watched him walk her to the door. *Don’t do it.* The kid stood there awkwardly and then turned and waved goodbye as he went back to his truck.

Rourk needed to pull himself together. He wasn’t sure if he would have been able to control himself had she kissed him. He wondered briefly if the assignment was too much for him. Richard wouldn’t have

asked him to do it if it wasn't important. He needed to think of her as an assignment and nothing more. Unfortunately, that was easier said than done.

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Thaddeus was beyond frustrated. He had been working with his mother for weeks trying to shield his gift it seemed impossible. They finally resigned that either he wasn't old enough or his sight was too strong to block. He had been getting flashes of visions more often. The battle was rapidly approaching, and he wasn't sure they were going to be ready. Sometimes he wondered what it would be like to have a normal mind without constant visions.

Thaddeus pushed his thoughts aside. He needed to focus on Keegan; she had gotten stronger and faster. The training had made a tremendous difference in her skills. He knew better than to let his mind wander during a fight.

Thaddeus pressed forward with his attack, forcing Keegan backwards. He immediately lunged forward again, and Keegan swiftly blocked his sword. In a quick burst, she pushed him back several steps. With little effort, Thaddeus paired her strikes and then went after her.

They'd been sparring for over an hour. He decided to end it now. He drove forward lifted his sword for the final blow. Just as his sword was about to make contact she was gone. Thaddeus sheathed his sword with slight smile on his lips.

Wiping the sweat off his face he grabbed a drink and he headed for the shower. He needed to talk to his father. After changing into a pair of jeans and his favorite Metallica T-shirt he headed in his father's direction.

Thaddeus stood outside of Richard's study, which was more like a library than an office. He knocked sharply on the door before entering. This was one of his favorite rooms in the house. It was made entirely from teak. Bookshelves surrounded the room. Taking a deep breath, he enjoyed the faint scent of wood. This room gave credence to one of his father's favorite sayings: *Knowledge is power not only in warfare, but in life.* He had books on every topic you could think of.

His father looked up from his book and leaned back in his chair, giving his son his undivided attention. "I believe she is ready."

Richard sighed, putting down his book to rub his face with both hands, and a look of relief came across it. “I was worried that you would not have enough time to prepare her.”

Thad’s first visions as a child had shown Keegan dying. He must have been about six at the time. He could still picture the vision as clear as day. Visions were strange in that they did not always show the whole picture, usually just snapshots.

*She was on the ground, an arrow through her heart. Blood was everywhere. People screamed. Swords clashed. Blackness. As quickly as that vision ended, another one started. In this one, there was a fork in the road. Keegan, laughing, ran to the right. Behind her came a tall boy with reddish hair, he was also laughing. He grabbed her by the waist and swung her around.*

Although only a boy, Thaddeus had never been a regular child. Richard had always known there was something special about his son. He was not surprised to learn his son was the child of prophecy.

Part of Richard’s job as commander of the Elfin specialized unit was to oversee the preparation of the young warriors. The ones who showed promise were taken at a young age and molded to join their specialized unit. Rourk stood out. He was noticed even earlier than most. His potential was obvious to everyone.

After the young warriors were trained and became of age they had to spend time in the regular human military. They could choose their branch as long as their end goal was to belong to the special operations community. It was then their choice if they wanted to stay in the human military or return to the Elfin Army of the light.

Richard himself had decided to stay in the U.S. Army Special Forces until he reached retirement age. Too many wars were going on for him to leave, and he felt he was of more value there. Recently, there had been talk of making an exception for Rourk and allowing him to join their specialized unit without joining the human military. Because of Thaddeus’ vision and his relationship with Keegan, keeping him around could change the outcome of the great battle.

## CHAPTER 11

Keegan tossed piles of clothes on the floor searching for the perfect outfit to wear to the concert. *Why was it always so hard to find something to wear?* She looked around her room and clothes were all over the place. *So many outfits and still nothing to wear.* Picking up her phone, she texted Lauren to meet her at the mall. Keegan's mom dropped her off at Target and she walked the rest of the way. It wasn't that far, but she still felt annoyed that her mom didn't take her the whole way.

Rourk wasn't far behind and wondered where she was headed this time. Since he started following her, he'd started to notice patterns in her behavior. For instance, she couldn't pass a Starbucks without getting a white chocolate mocha which she bought almost daily. *What could she possibly want or need all the clothing for?*

What bothered Rourk most was Keegan's phone. She was always texting and oblivious to what was going on around her. This left her extremely vulnerable, and at times he wished he could grab her phone and smash it. Taking a deep breath he reminded himself that he was there for her protection. In essence, he was her eyes and ears.

One of Rourk's secondary gifts was the ability to detect other creatures, and he noticed an increase in the amount of creatures of the dark lately. It was as if they were coming out of the woodwork. He knew they were always there, but since taking on his new assignment he had a heightened sense of awareness. He wondered if Keegan knew how many of the kids at her school were not human. Rourk couldn't always tell what kind of creature they were, but he always knew if they were with the light or dark. So far, he had only seen her have interaction with others from the light. They were not elves though, that much he was sure of.

Rourk found it interesting that Keegan got so much pleasure from something as basic as shopping. He didn't have any sisters, and his mother died when he was young so Rourk was not used to being around the opposite sex. He had never even had a girlfriend. To begin his training Rourk was taken from school younger than most. They said he

showed promise, and they didn't want it to be tainted by being around humans longer than necessary.

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Keegan decided on a white tank top and skinny jeans. Now, on to accessories. There were so many beautiful things in the world and she wished she could have them all. She'd been shopping with Lauren for hours. They went in store after store trying on hats, sunglasses, shoes and jewelry. Most of the time they were laughing at each other. Keegan put on a large floppy hat and a pair of oversized glasses and then walked the aisle as if it were a catwalk. She made a quick spin and turned to Lauren and lowered her glasses, which led Lauren to join in. They were putting on their own fashion show, and people were staring at them, but they didn't seem to notice or care.

After a while the girls were finally done shopping. Lauren's mother picked them up and dropped Keegan off at home. Rourke always felt relieved when he knew she arrived home safely. Now, he could go home and get some sleep.

Keegan's mother was folding laundry when she walked in. She leaned her head out of the door to the laundry room and asked, "What did you get to wear for the concert?"

Keegan smiled and said, "White tank top and skinny jeans." She saw her mother's face change and thought *uh-oh*. Her mother had a quick temper.

Calmly, Emerald said, "Keegan, go up to your room and pick out your favorite pair of jeans and top." Puzzled, she went upstairs and did as she was told. Her mother glared when she returned and said, "Now throw them in the trash."

A look of shock crossed Keegan's face. "What?"

Her mom went back to folding the clothes. "You have at least a half dozen white tank tops and skinny jeans upstairs. You are so spoiled, Keegan. You don't even appreciate all you have."

Keegan stomped up the stairs and slammed her door. She was so mad at her mother. It was ridiculous; if she had said she got a blue shirt none of this would have happened. Now, she had lost her favorite pair of jeans. Her mom got so mad over the stupidest things. At least she got to

keep the outfit for the concert. What made no sense to her was the outfit she had to throw away cost twice as much as the new one.

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When Rourk walked in, his father, Greg, was sitting in the living room with the lights off. Rourk sank into the oversized leather chair across from his father, putting his feet on the coffee table. They sat in silence for several minutes.

“So, how was your day, Dad? Anything of interest going on?”

“Not really, just the usual.”

They lapsed back into silence. His father never had much to say. Ever since Rourk’s mother died, his dad had closed himself off from everyone, and Rourk missed the days when the man had been filled with life. They used to spend so much time together.

Staring at his father, he thought, *we look nothing alike*. Rourk took after his mother’s side of the family. His dad looked like he could be a movie star. He had dark hair graying at the temples, intense blue eyes, and a strong jaw line. At work, his nickname was Fisher. The guys like to tease him saying he looked like the live version of Sam Fisher from *Splinter Cell*. Even with age, the lines just seem to give him more character. Rourk was always amused at how women practically threw themselves at his dad. No one stood a chance though; he was altogether indifferent toward women. Rourk’s mother had been the only one for him.

His father didn’t bother asking about his day, even though Rourk was sure he must have heard about his new assignment. Like Richard, he was retired military, and now they worked together. He wouldn’t say they were friends, but they unquestionably had a mutual respect for one another.

Rourk stretched and yawned, “I’m headed to bed. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Goodnight.”

Tomorrow was the concert Keegan would be attending. It was going to be a long day, and he needed his sleep.

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Keegan woke up to the sound of a little hand knocking on the door yelling, “Kee-kee-kee!”

Ugh. She pulled the blankets over her head. Why had she taught Warrick how to knock on doors? It was funny when he was doing it to Thaddeus. He sounded so cute, though, that she couldn't resist, and it didn't take long before she gave in and opened the door.

Her little brother ran in and crawled in bed with her. He was always so happy in the morning, and it was impossible to stay angry at him. Reaching over, she grabbed her iPad and selected *30 Seconds to Mars* to play. She was already excited about the concert even though it was still ten hours away.

Keegan finally stumbled downstairs a couple hours later and noticed both her aunts were over for a visit. It was strange to see the three sisters sitting together; they looked a lot alike, and yet each was so different from the other. They all had round faces and the same blue eyes, but what set their features apart were the subtle difference in their noses and lips. Of course they all had different hair. Brigid's hair was long, dark and wavy, Kat's was long, curly and auburn and her mother had recently chopped off her ginger locks into a short pixie cut.

Keegan was glad she only had brothers. She wouldn't want to deal with sisters. They seemed to be getting along now, but usually drama was around the corner when they were all in the same room. Too tired to pay attention to what they were talking about, she and Warrick went and lay on the couch.

From outside, Keegan heard lead hitting steel. Obviously her dad and Thaddeus were down at the range. She would have joined them if she wasn't so tired.

If there was one thing her family enjoyed it was shooting guns. They constantly had competitions but to make things fair, their father had to shoot with only one hand and from twice the distance as everyone else. Of course, he still managed to win most of the time. It was kind of ironic because in any battles between light and dark, guns were not permitted, nor were any of the high tech gadgets of the present day. It was a way they honored the traditions of the earlier elves.

The day passed quicker than Keegan expected. She read some of her new book and edited more photos. Then it was time to get ready for the concert. Katrina would be there soon, and then they would pick up the



rest of girls on the way. For some reason, Keegan couldn't shake the feeling that something terrible was going to happen.

Keegan knocked on her brother's door.

"Come in," he yelled.

When she walked in, he had his nose to the television screen and the game controller between his hands, as always. She walked up to him and said, "Do you think I look good enough to go to the concert?"

He looked up from his game, pursing his lips as he eyed her. "You look even uglier than usual."

Relief washed over her. "Are you sure?" She knew he was always honest with her about such things and always said the opposite of what he meant. It was kind of an inside joke with them.

Her real reason for going into his room was to see if he would give her a warning about the concert. He said nothing and went right back to his game, effectively shutting her out. Keegan watched him for a while and then left.

After she shut the door, Thaddeus grimaced. His gift was at times too much for him to handle. One of the main rules for someone with his gift was not to interfere with fate. It was beyond frustrating for him. What was the use of having this so-called gift if he couldn't help others? He wanted to tell his sister to stay home and not go to the stupid concert. Instead, he did what his father suggested and worked on his breathing to control the fear racing through him. Taking a deep breath, he held it for the count of three, exhaled for the count of three, and repeated until he felt his heartbeat return to normal.

Thaddeus couldn't help feeling restless. He glanced over at his sneakers, but decided he was better off without them. He walked through the house and yelled, "Going for a run."

Thaddeus passed through the kitchen where his dad was on his MacBook. He glanced down at his son's feet. "Would you like some company?"

It was impossible to tell his father no, so he grumbled, "Sure."

His father shut the laptop and got to his feet. "Give me a second."

Thaddeus was waiting on one of the large rocks outside the door when his father came out of the house wearing nothing but running shorts. It was hard not to stare at the scars that covered his body. He'd

always been in awe of him. In his eyes, he looked more like a Viking than an elf. He looked so powerful most people were afraid of him.

His father stroked his red beard, which was a sign he was thinking.

Thaddeus grinned, “Sure you don’t want to grab your shoes old man?” In truth, his father should not run without shoes. His left foot had severe nerve damage. Thaddeus knew the run was going to cause him much pain. He also knew and appreciated the reasoning behind it. Some people were born to be leaders, and his father was one of them. He could instill admiration and make others feel as if they were his equal at the same time.

“Lead the way, son.”

Thaddeus took off in a sprint, his father close behind him. The wind felt great against his face. He loved feeling the ground beneath his feet. He always felt so free when he was running. Even though his father was beside him, it was like he was alone.

They ran for miles jumping and dodging fallen trees, mostly staying on the winding trails. Richard knew better than to say anything to his son. He would talk when he was ready. Right now, he just needed him to know he was there for him. Richard loved his family more than anything. He could never truly understand what Thaddeus was going through because of his gift. All he could do was to give him the mechanisms he needed to help him deal with it. Physical activity was one of those mechanisms. Eventually, Thaddeus collapsed on the ground physically exhausted. Looking over at his father he mumbled, “Thank you.”

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Rourk arrived hours before the concert was to take place. This situation was not ideal by any means. It was going to be almost impossible to keep an eye on her from a distance. Tonight he was going to have to get closer to her than ever before. Just the thought made his pulse race. To his advantage, the place would be packed, and she had no idea what he looked like. This was more of a nightmare than he had imagined. He needed help to protect her in this chaos. The reality was he had no support. He took some comfort in knowing that Richard knew where his daughter was and didn’t feel the need to send reinforcements.

The number of people at the concert was staggering. Not to mention the fact that there were numerous light and dark creatures packing the place. His hope was that they were all there for the same reason, to enjoy the concert.

Rourk pushed his way through the crowd searching for her. He closed his eyes and could see where she was in relation to the stage and headed in that direction. The lights went out, and everyone screamed. He felt his chest tighten and then what sounded like explosions went off and the stage lit up. The opening act had started.

Rourk's head pounded; the music was blaring. All around him people danced, sang at the top of their lungs and crushed together. Every time he advanced, he got pushed back by the crowd. He was still not close enough to protect her. People were drinking and smoking pot. It made him sick. He could never understand how people considered getting drunk and losing control fun. His mother had been killed by a drunk driver, and not even his father could prevent her death from happening.

With more urgency, he pushed his way through, and finally she was in his sights. Rourk studied her. He noticed she looked back with a look of concern on her face. Did she sense danger? Could she possibly recognize him? She eventually seemed to relax and enjoy the music. Rourk never even glanced at the stage; his eyes were only on her.

Hours passed and he wondered how much longer the concert would last. Just when he thought it was over, the band took encores. His whole body tensed. Keegan was picked up and passed around the crowd. *What the hell are they doing?* No one seemed bothered by this, if anything they seemed excited. Lauren and Anna laughed and screamed. Even her aunt seemed to think it was funny. Where were they taking her?

Rourk was now forcefully pushing his way through the crowd, but just when he came close they would send her in a different direction. He closed his eyes and pictured her face. She was smiling and yelling with excitement. This puzzled him. Why wasn't anyone concerned? He scanned the crowd and saw others were being passed around in the same manner. Apparently, it was something that was not uncommon. He had never been to a concert before and wasn't aware of what happened. Obviously he should have researched more.

He was frantically trying to get to her. *Where did she go?* Again he closed his eyes and he could see she was okay, but he could not get her exact location. There were too many people, and it was too dark.

Abruptly, he stopped. She was getting closer to the wall. Rourk moved horizontally which made it easier for him to push his way through the crowd. He closed his eyes again and did not like what he saw. Gone was the look of excitement, and on her face, a look of alarm. Rourk realized she was no longer being passed around. Four guys were holding onto her and carrying her to the side.

Time stood still. Rourk felt the rage building in his chest. He no longer heard the music, and it seemed as if people parted to make a path for him, even though they hadn't. He pushed through as the four men who held Keegan wrestled her out of the crowd. They let her down, and the biggest of the men pushed Keegan toward the wall.

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Keegan was terrified. Her eyes glanced frantically around trying to think a way out of this situation. *How could this be happening, even with all her training?* She was sure she could not defend herself against four guys. A drop of sweat fell from her face, and her heart was racing. The biggest one pushed her up against the wall. She could smell the alcohol on his breath.

“Well, aren't you a fine piece of meat?”

Glaring at him, she said, “Get your hands off me.”

“A feisty one, eh?” he laughed.

Without thinking, she drove her knee into his groin. He groaned and doubled over. The others advanced, and the big one yelled, “She's mine.”

She felt like she was going to throw up when his hands groped her chest. *Please don't do this*, she thought. *I belong to Rourk.*

When she thought his name, it pierced through his heart. Nothing mattered to him except keeping her safe. *How dare anyone else lay their hands on her.* He wanted to make them pay.

Out of nowhere, Keegan felt her attacker be pulled off her. She looked up just as a flash of light went off, and what she saw made her heart drop; she felt as if she were in a free fall as she stared into the most

beautiful face she'd ever seen. His grey eyes met hers and he tipped his head, giving her a slight nod.

Keegan whispered *Rourk?* It was only a matter of seconds, but it felt like a lifetime. He yelled over the crowd, "Go to the exit and text your friends to meet you." His voice sounded like music to her ears; it was deep but not too deep and filled with authority.

As much as she hated to leave, she did not dare to ignore him. She walked away.

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Rourk's hand yanked back the guy's head and he covered his mouth and chin so no one would hear him scream. He leaned down and whispered in his ear, "She is mine." Without hesitation he violently wrenched his head to the right and forcefully back to the left snapping his neck before he let the guy fall to the ground.

Rourk wasn't worried about being noticed. It was a perfect kill spot with all the noise and darkness. As he expected, the other three were nowhere to be found. Once they realized it was no longer them against a girl they scattered. *Cowards. What kind of man attacks an innocent girl?*

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Keegan's heart pounded. She couldn't wrap her mind around what happened. *Was that actually Rourk who saved her? Why was he here?* She looked all over for him, but he was gone.

She felt dirty and wanted to go home and take a shower. The atmosphere of the concert: the mass of bodies and the noise, no longer felt fun but frightening.

Katrina and the girls found her and they headed out. Anna and Lauren went on and on about how awesome it was that she got to crowd surf. Keegan turned and said, "It was not as much fun as you would think. I'm probably going to be bruised tomorrow." She wanted to tell them about what had happened, but then she would have to explain Rourk. They were humans and would never understand.

Katrina was unusually quiet on the drive home. After they dropped off Keegan's friends at their homes, she pulled into a gas station parking lot.

Turning towards her with a look of concern on her face, she asked, "Are you okay?"

Knowing it was useless to lie to a mind reader, Keegan shook her head. "I have never been that scared in my life."

Katrina looked as though she were about to cry. "I am so sorry; I shouldn't have allowed that to happen. Your parents are going to be angry with me."

"You know that's ridiculous. There was nothing you could have done. It ended well thanks to the mysterious guy who saved me. Katrina, I really think it was Rourk."

Katrina looked at Keegan and said nothing.

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On his way home, Rourk called Richard and filled him in on what took place. He left out the part about breaking the guy's neck. Richard asked if it was a creature of the dark that had attacked her. Rourk paused for a second and replied, "No, he was human."

When Rourk knew Keegan was safe at home, he headed for home himself. When he walked through the door his father sat in the same spot as he had the day before.

"I killed a man today," Rourk said.

His father stood up and walked towards Rourk. "Come into the kitchen and we'll talk."

His dad turned on the coffee, his movements methodical. The darkness outside the small kitchen window was absolute. Rourk sat at the table, resting his head in his hands.

"The first kill is always the hardest, but it gets easier," he said quietly, turning to face his son.

Rourk met his father's troubled eyes across the distance between them. "Father, the only thing that bothers me is that I felt nothing. No remorse. I always thought it'd be hard to take a life, that it would haunt me. I snapped his neck and walked away as if nothing happened. I felt calm. How could I feel calm about taking a life?"

As if he were trying to compose his thoughts before he spoke, his father, turned away to pour coffee in the mugs. "We know life's sacred probably better than most because of the loss of your mother. However, since birth you've been trained to be a warrior. It's who you are. It's in your blood. Taking life is part of it. You have been so conditioned to accept your role that it's desensitized you. There's no shame in that. If

anything, you are lucky. Nothing would make me happier than knowing you're able to escape the nightmares that haunt some soldiers."

They lapsed back into silence as his father placed Rourk's coffee in front of him and sat across the table. It was the longest conversation they'd had in a very long time.

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Thaddeus was relieved when his sister walked through the door. He looked at her closely; she seemed to be alright.

Noticing how he was observing her, she said, "You could have warned me."

"Keegan, you know I couldn't. Believe me, it's much harder for me than you can imagine."

She surprised him by saying, "Rourk saved me."

"How do you know it was him?"

She had a stupid, dreamy look on her face and replied, "I just know."

He was curious. "Did he talk to you?"

Thaddeus was aware Rourk was assigned to Keegan, so he knew it was him. He was surprised Keegan had recognized him. Would his father allow them to meet now? If they knew each other, it would make it much easier for Rourk to protect her.

"Only to tell me to leave," Keegan responded, shaking off her reverie. "I'm really tired and need to get some sleep."

Keegan took a long hot shower and then got in bed. She pictured his grey eyes and felt her pulse quicken. It had to have been Rourk. Sure she had found guys attractive, but never in her life had anyone else had that kind of effect on her. She would have followed him to the end of the world if he asked. One year and five months and she would be with him for the rest of her life. She hoped she didn't have to wait that long to see him again. Eventually, she drifted off to sleep hoping she would see him in her dreams.

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Thaddeus loved going to bed. It was the only time the visions didn't haunt him. He always had vision-free, dreamless nights. It was like a reset switch for his brain and kept him from going crazy. He closed his eyes and let sleep take over.

*Looking frantically around, he tried to figure out where he was. His body felt strange as if he were watching through someone else's eyes. Fear raced through his veins. Never had he felt this scared. Lots of blood everywhere, body parts, screams, dear God where was he? Green, the land was so green, even though stained with blood. He looked up and saw a beautiful orange moon. It looked out of place with all the destruction.*

Thaddeus woke, drenched in sweat. He looked at his clock; it felt as if the dream only lasted a few seconds, but two hours had passed. He removed the blanket with trembling fingers and got out of the bed, his feet unsteady. He didn't know what to do, but he had to talk to his father. Thaddeus knew he would be sleeping, but it couldn't wait.

He knocked on the door lightly. Richard heard the knock and slowly got out of bed, trying not to wake his wife. He glanced over at her and his heart felt full. Even after all these years she still had the same effect on him as she did the first day they met. Richard opened the door to see his son standing there and the fear that was etched on his face. He knew now was not the time to coddle him.

He strode out in front of his son knowing he would follow. Richard led him down the steps and, opening the front door, they went out on the porch.

"Have a seat, son."

Taking a deep shaky breath, Thaddeus sat on the porch swing and said, "I had a dream. Well since I don't dream it had to have been a vision." Waiting patiently, his father slightly nodded his head to continue. "Father, it was horrible."

Richard leaned forward, "Tell me exactly what you saw and don't leave anything out. Close your eyes and picture the scene."

Closing his eyes, Thaddeus saw the scene just like he had the first time. "There's so much blood, body parts everywhere, and the noise." Unconsciously, he covered his ears.

"Thaddeus, I need the details not your feelings. Use your breathing exercises." As usual, his father was right. After a few deep breaths he felt better and could concentrate more.

"The land is green with rolling hills. So many dead bodies, even women and children."



Richard gripped the arm of his chair. “I need more. What else do you see?”

Thaddeus glanced left then right, scanning over the bodies. The light from the moon somehow he knew that was important. “The moon is large and orange.” Opening his eyes he said, “That is all I see, I’m sorry.”

His father looked up at the sky and said, “Thank you Gods for this gift.” He reached over and grasped his son by the shoulders, “I could kiss you.”

Thaddeus said nothing.

His father got up and paced the porch. “This is brilliant. We know the time and place of the battle; we have the upper hand.”

Thaddeus raised an eyebrow, “Care to fill me in?”

He noticed his breathing had returned to normal, and he was no longer afraid.

“I believe this is a good omen. Fate always has its way. The battle will take place in Ireland during the harvest moon. Your mother and I got engaged on the night of a harvest moon. This year it falls on Keegan’s birthday. Your mother was named after Ireland, where her parents met, also known as the Emerald Isle. We have five months to prepare. Thaddeus, tomorrow we’ll hold a meeting, and you will have to speak. You are the most respected seer of our time. I need you to think like a warrior and only give out as much information as necessary. There’s no need to tell anything other than the time and place. Do you understand?”

Thaddeus grinned. “Law 4 from *The 48 Laws of Power* by Robert Green. Always say less than necessary.”

## CHAPTER 12

There were many preparations that needed to be made. Richard looked down at his watch. It was 0300. He picked up his iPhone and texted his brother-in-laws a simple message: CAMP NOW. He then hesitated before sending a text to Rourk: CAMP NOW, BRING YOUR FATHER.

Groggy from sleep, Rourk heard his phone go off. He flipped it open and saw the text, and was instantly awake. He threw on the clothes he wore the day before, unworried whether they were clean or not. Fully alert, he walked to his father's room and didn't bother to knock. "Richard needs us," he called into the dark.

His father bolted out of bed. With haste, he got ready, and the two men left to make the drive to camp. They arrived just as the other men did.

Richard looked at Rourk, and told him, "You've been relieved of your duty."

Rourk's face did not change. His mind raced. *Did he find out I killed that guy?* He could think of nothing else he'd done that would cause his dismissal. He felt a dull ache in his heart at the thought of not seeing Keegan again.

"Thaddeus has had a vision," Richard said. All eyes turned to Thaddeus where he sat with his hands clasped in his lap and his face serene.

"I have seen the place and date of the Great Battle," Thaddeus said, his voice strong and sure. The men all looked slightly surprised, glancing around at each other in shock, and eager to learn more. "We have five months to prepare. September twelfth during the harvest moon, our battle will be raging."

They all had questions, but knew it was pointless to ask.

Richard stepped forward, commanding the room. "This obviously gives us the upper hand. We must prepare our men. With this knowledge, I feel we will prevail."

Drew, smiling, replied, "Save your pep talks for the soldiers."

Richard grinned, "You're right, force of habit."

They all relaxed and sat down as equals to discuss the preparations. They were all powerful men, but the one who held the most power was the youngest—Thaddeus. Rourk was glad he was on their side.

Rourk was relieved to know Richard wasn't angry with him and he was honored to be among the small group making preparations for the battle. Rourk also knew he had to push Keegan out of his thoughts for now. He needed to be 100% focused on what lay ahead. Of course, keeping Keegan off his mind was going to be extremely difficult. She'd been thinking about him almost constantly since the concert. Rourk knew if they didn't win this battle he would never have the pleasure of getting to know her.

They had to win.

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Keegan woke up knowing she'd had no dreams the night before. Usually she looked forward to it, but she didn't want to go to school. Everyone paled in comparison to Rourk. She had to figure out a way to find him. He obviously didn't live too far away if he was at the concert. She was still puzzled by the fact that he was there. Her mother would say that it was fate. Keegan thought it was a bit too much of a coincidence.

Keegan and her mother were still not talking after the jean incident. They both were so stubborn that sometimes they would stay angry for days. Keegan was anxious to tell her about Rourk. She came down the stairs to find her mother sitting at the kitchen table reading the newspaper over a mug of tea.

"Mom, I'm sorry." She really didn't know what she was apologizing for, but she knew it was the quickest way to get back in her good graces.

Her mother was silent a moment. "Perhaps I overreacted. I just don't want you to take things for granted."

Keegan smiled and gave her a hug, then slid into the seat next to her. "You won't believe what happened at the concert."

"What happened?" Looking at her daughter, Emerald felt a rush of warmth mixed with relief. Of course, Katrina had already filled her in on what happened. She was just grateful that her daughter was unharmed.

Katrina did not believe the boy was Rourk so when Keegan got to that part of the story, Emerald was surprised to hear her describe Rourk in detail.

“Mother, I know it was him, it had to be.”

Her mom looked thoughtful and answered slowly. “I hope it was him. Then you’ll have a wonderful story to tell your children at bedtime.”

Emerald dropped Keegan off at school and then called her husband. Richard was sitting over some paperwork at his desk with an intense headache when heard his phone ring. He was surprised to see it was his wife. She never called.

“Will you be coming home for lunch?”

He sighed, “You know I would love to, but I am very busy today.”

In a calm tone she said, “I think it would be a good idea if you made time to see me. If you would like I can come to your camp or we can meet somewhere.”

He knew he was in trouble. His wife had the quickest temper of anyone he had ever met, so he knew to be worried when she was eerily calm. “On second thought, of course I have time to come home and have lunch with my beautiful wife. I will be there before noon.”

She hung up the phone without saying goodbye.

Richard didn’t have time to dissect what his wife was angry about. He would deal with it when he got there. He knew he would never understand the way her mind worked. She had always been a mystery to him. He thought of a quote from one of his favorite books:

*Contradictions do not exist. Whenever you think you are facing a contradiction, check your premises. You will find that one of them is wrong.* ~Francisco d’Anconia.

Smiling Richard thought, Francisco, you have not met my wife.

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At school, Keegan could not stop thinking of Rourk. Usually she was loud and bubbly. Today, she didn’t even have the patience for Donald and his crew. They seemed so childish. She knew Rourk would never act like them. They were running around the halls, trying to catch and attack one another. Normally, she would join them, but now it just seemed lame. She felt like yelling at them to grow up.

Keegan sent a text to her mom that said: *Can I come home early?*

Of course her mom wanted to know why. How could she explain she just suddenly felt like she didn't belong there anymore?

*I have a headache*, Keegan wrote.

The quick response: *Motrin*. Ugh!

*Please mom, I just don't want to be here. Everyone's getting on my nerves, they seem so childish.*

There was a long break before Keegan received a response: *No, I will pick you up at the normal time.*

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Emerald slammed her phone on the counter. What was Richard thinking? She decided to go to the gym. She needed to burn off some of her frustration. It was going to be hard enough to control herself when she talked to her husband. He once told her if he could change one thing about her it would be her temper. She tried to control it, but it didn't always work. She had her father to thank for passing down the trait.

Emerald met up with Richard when he arrived home and shared her frustrations with him.

"Believe it or not I also went through hell during the three months after we met," he said. "Thankfully, I threw myself into my job. My friends thought I had gone crazy. I no longer chased women and didn't want to drink or go out." Richard frowned, "I'm sorry I didn't think that far ahead. I was selfish. My only concern was keeping our daughter safe and I knew Rourk would protect her with his life."

Emerald knew there were things her husband was unable to tell her. "So what do you think we should do?" he asked.

Taking a deep breath she said, "I think we should allow them to be together."

This was not what he expected her to say. "Are you sure that is a good idea?"

"I think it is our only option. I will not allow our daughter to be miserable because you made a mistake in judgment." There was the sharp tongue he'd been expecting. She always knew just what to say to get under his skin.

"Let's compromise," he said. "We will allow them to meet on her seventeenth birthday."

She looked at him suspiciously. “That is five months away.” He closed his eyes, thinking. The only thing he could do was tell her the truth. “Rourk is going to be busy until then. The great battle is going to take place on Keegan’s birthday.”

Emerald walked towards the couch and sat down. “So soon? I thought we would have more time.”

He could sense her mind quickly going over scenarios. She had a sharp mind which was one of the things he found most appealing about her. She was just as dangerous as the most experienced soldiers. He wished he could take credit for that, but it was her father. He never got the son he wanted so the next best thing was his tomboy of a daughter. She had all the training that Thaddeus had and then some. Emerald’s father was fearless. He was the worst kind of soldier. When you have no fear, you don’t use the most valuable weapon, which of course is the mind. As a result, he was killed in battle.

“Do you remember the first time we sparred?” Richard asked fondly.

She smiled, “Of course, you underestimated me.”

He laughed, “You looked so innocent and tiny. I never respected anyone more and I still feel that way. Whatever you think is the correct thing to do, we’ll do it.”

He knew he had said the right thing when he saw her shoulders relax.

“What does a man have to do to get fed around here?” he said. “I don’t have much time left.”

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Once Richard was gone, Emerald sat down to think. She knew he was correct. She smiled. He was usually right, but she didn’t like to let him know. She also knew he only had Keegan’s best interest at heart and she shouldn’t be angry at him for that. They would wait until after the battle. Rourk would have too much on his mind and throwing Keegan into the mix would almost be cruel. She was going to have to work hard to keep Keegan occupied in the meantime.

Emerald picked Keegan up from school that day, giving her a big smile as she climbed in the car. She couldn’t help but think how beautiful her daughter was, even in her school uniform. “So I was thinking. You know how your birthday is in five months?”

Keegan tucked her backpack on the floorboard between her legs and turned wide eyes to her mother. She loved her birthday, almost as much as she loved the presents.

“We promised you when you turned 17 that we would get you a vehicle.” Emerald saw the spark come back to Keegan’s eyes.

“I know exactly what I want, a navy blue four door Jeep. Of course, it will have to be lifted and have big tires. Dad said I could only get a two door jeep, but do you think you can convince him a four door would be better?”

Emerald smiled, “Well, they are safer.” Keegan started bouncing up and down like she was five again. Her daughter could drive her crazy at times, but she loved her more than life itself. “Would you like to test drive some?”

Keegan looked over in disbelief. “Seriously?”

They spend the rest of the day driving from one dealership to the next looking at Jeeps and then headed for home. Emerald knew Richard would not be home for dinner. He would probably miss many meals over the next few months. She worried about Thaddeus because of his age. She had to let that go. He was born for the great battle.

Emerald called her sisters and asked if they wanted to come over for dinner. They gladly accepted. She wondered if they knew what was going on. Having them there would also help keep Keegan’s mind off things. Distraction was the game plan.

Keara walked through the door first. She was clad in long flowing pink skirt with flowers and a fitted long sleeve t-shirt that looked great on her tall frame. Her hair was wild and standing up all over the place.

“Nice fro, Keara,” Keegan said. She patted the top of her wiry dark hair; it went down like a sponge.

Keara did a little dance and bopped her hair around and snapped her fingers. She looked like someone from the seventies.

“I love your hair Keara. If I had your hair I’d be wearing it wild all the time, it looks awesome.” Keegan said.

“Yeah, yeah, that’s easy for you to say. It takes hours to get it relaxed or braided. I’d trade with you in a second. Mom won’t let me wear it like this very often.”

“Brigid, you need to let Keara wear her hair like this, it’s incredible. I’m so jealous.”

“Sure, Keegan as long as you come over and deal with it, she can wear it any way she wants.”

Keara sighed and slumped down on to the couch.

“So what’s been going on with you? How’s school? You like any boys?” Keegan asked her as she sat down next to her on the cushions.

“School sucks, nothing has been going on with me, and you know I don’t like boys. I’m going to be a nun.”

“Wait until you meet your chosen; your thoughts of becoming a nun will be out the window.”

Keara turned her eyes to her cousin, sadness filling them. “Keegan, we don’t even know if I’ll have a chosen. I’m not full blooded like you guys.”

“You’ll have a chosen, you’re too awesome not to.”

Keegan had never really thought of that issue. She knew it was hard for Keara being different from them, but she never really thought of the consequences that came with her being half elf.

“Let’s go play with the rest of the kids,” Keegan said. “I think we should take them outside and you can start a rainstorm. That way we can play in the puddles.”

Keara smiled wickedly as they headed out the door.

Emerald and her sisters stayed in the living room chatting away.

Kat broke the ice on what they were all thinking about. “It’s hard to believe that The Great Battle is going to take place in our lifetime, and we are all so deeply involved. Life as we know it could all be over soon. Do you think we will be able to win?”

Brigid looked away. “John says the numbers are against us.” They all lapsed into silence. Everyone knew John would be able to calculate the probability.

Emerald leaned back in her chair. “Fate has been set in motion. We need to wait and see.”

Katrina looked annoyed. “How can you just sit back all relaxed and say fate will decide? Your husband is the leader of the light.”

This was the wrong thing to say. Glaring at her sister, Emerald said, “You are one to talk, both of you. Neither of you could protect yourself



if needed. If anyone is sitting back and letting things take its course, it's you."

Her comment struck a nerve. They had both been envious of the time their father spent training her. Although, at the time, neither of them had any interest.

Katrina knew enough to diffuse the situation. "You have a valid point."

Emerald had tried several times to get Katrina interested. Katrina would humor her for a little while. She'd seemed to enjoy Krav Maga. However, she lost interest after a short time and stopped going.

Emerald had an idea. "What do you say you guys start coming over in the evenings, and we will train together? Keegan has been training, and now that Thaddeus is busy, she lost her training partner."

Brigid and Katrina glanced at each other. Finally, Brigid shrugged her shoulder, "Sure why not? We have nothing better to do."

Keegan came into the room with Warrick and Mackenna clinging to her legs and giggling. Katrina said, "You've got three new training partners."

Keegan stared at them, "What are you talking about?"

"Your mother pointed out the fact that we don't have the ability to protect ourselves. We decided we would join in on your training sessions," Brigid said with a grin. "Aren't you lucky?"

Keegan smiled. "That sounds like fun."

## CHAPTER 13

The weeks seemed to blur together for Keegan. She went to school, trained and sometimes went out. She didn't feel like going out, but her mother made sure she spent time with her friends. Her mom brought them all movie tickets, bowling passes, and once she even got them tickets for miniature golf. Her friends thought she had the coolest mom ever. So much for her mother not spoiling her. Sometimes Keegan thought her mother was testing her. Why else would she be so unnecessarily generous? Although Keegan had to admit she'd remembered to say thank you more often. Seeing how excited her friends got over the gifts made her realize she probably didn't genuinely appreciate all the things she had.

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Emerald was tremendously impressed with the progress her sisters had made in three months. She was even more blown away by Keegan. She wasn't aware of how much she'd advanced. She was also an excellent instructor. Katrina and Brigid learned at a fast pace because Keegan had a knack for making things seem easy.

Keegan held the pad up for Katrina as she worked on her foot strikes. Katrina said, "So Emerald, I think I am ready to take you."

Emerald grinned. "It's about time."

Katrina said, "I'll grab the headgear."

"Don't bother," Emerald said. "I'm a healer, remember."

Brigid smirked. "This I gotta see."

Katrina walked towards the middle of the room. She was thinking *come on Kat you can do this. You have the advantage of knowing her next move.*

Emerald thought of the song *Three Blind Mice*. She knew it would distract Katrina, who could hear her thoughts.

Katrina turned around and Emerald yanked her shoulder down and delivered an intensely painful knee strike to her solar plexus. Doubling over, Katrina took an elbow to the side of her face. Her blood splashed across the floor.

“Really sis, you didn’t think I would forget you were a mind reader did you?” Emerald said. She stepped back several paces to let her sister get back up.

*That little bitch*, Katrina thought as she ran towards her sister. Emerald ran towards her at the same time; one hand slammed her chest as the other arm drove her elbow into her throat. It happened so quickly Katrina was knocked off balance and landed on her ass. “Are we done here?” Emerald asked.

Katrina looked up and said, “Yes, we’re done.”

Emerald reached down to help her sister up. Katrina delivered a heel kick to the inside of her thigh. Emerald dropped to her knee, “Very nice,” she said and then she slammed her forehead into her sister’s head.

Kat saw stars. “Okay, okay, I’m really done this time.”

“I have to say Katrina, I’m impressed.”

Wiping the blood off her face, Katrina said, “Whatever! You kicked my ass.”

“Yes, but you took the lesson and used it. The element of surprise.” Emerald smiled, “Another lesson. You couldn’t have read my mind if you tried. I have been doing this for so long it is a reaction, there is no thought.”

Katrina was puzzled. “Well. Why did you sing?”

Emerald wiped her mouth after she took a swig of water and replied, “It was actually two lessons in one. You can’t rely on your gift, and it also distracted you. Anytime you can distract your opponent, do it.”

Emerald looked over at Brigid, “You want a go at it?”

Brigid glanced down at the blood on her other sister and said, “I think I’ll pass today, maybe next time.”

Emerald asked, “Would you like me to heal you, Katrina?”

Katrina paused briefly, “No, that’s okay. Drew will think it’s sexy.”

They all laughed.

After her aunts left, Keegan went into her mother’s bedroom and perched on the end of the bed. “Mom, my heart hurts.”

Emerald’s own heart beat a little faster. She sat next to her daughter, brushing her auburn hair away from her face. “What do you mean?”

“I have never felt so empty before. I feel like I’m just going through the days and they mean nothing.” Emerald watched Keegan’s eyes fill with tears. “Can you fix me?”

After a moment’s pause, Emerald nodded slowly and said, “I might be able to help you, but not with a healing. Perhaps the truth is what you need. It was Rourk that you saw at the concert.”

Keegan was surprised to feel tears running down her face. “I knew it was him.” Keegan frowned, “How do you know it was him and why was he there?”

Emerald looked at her daughter and felt a rush of sympathy. “It is a long story, but I will try to tell it quickly. As you know, things had been set in motion long before we were born. Your brother and your father’s roles were foretold in prophecy. What you are not aware of is that Thaddeus had a vision that you were to be a key player in the outcome.”

Keegan crinkled her nose, “How could I be involved?”

Looking sternly at her daughter, she said, “It doesn’t matter how or why, it just is.” After a break in silence, she continued. “Your father assigned Rourk to watch over you to keep you safe.”

A look of alarm crossed Keegan’s face. “He has been watching me? For how long—why didn’t anyone feel the need to inform me?”

Emerald stood up and laid her hand on her daughter’s shoulder. “Your father and I have agreed to let you meet Rourk after your birthday a year earlier than planned.”

“We will be together?” Keegan gasped. “Why do I have to wait until my birthday? What difference does two months make?”

She was getting impatient now. All she could think of doing was running to find Rourk. She never wanted anything so badly in her life. She started pacing the room. “Please mother, tell me where he is, I will do anything, I swear.”

Grabbing her daughter by the shoulders, Emerald said sternly, “Look at me, you need to focus. You cannot meet him until after your birthday. You need to accept that.”

“Why? None of this makes any sense.” Keegan was on the verge of hysteria, mindless with her desire to find Rourk right that minute.

Emerald paused, “I am going to tell you something that you cannot repeat to anyone. Do you understand?”

Keegan took a deep breath, trying to calm herself down. "Yes, I understand."

Her mother seemed to relax. "The great battle is going to take place on your birthday."

"What? Are you serious?" A surge of panic raced through her. "What if he dies in battle? What if we do not prevail? We will never meet. Mother, this is so unfair, I feel like I can't breathe."

Sharply, her mother responded, "Pull yourself together, Keegan. Like it or not, this family is deeply entwined with the possible extinction of our kind. Rourk needs to focus on preparing for the battle. You would only serve as a distraction. This is not a joke Keegan; this is a matter of life and death. You will continue your training, go to school and just be happy with the knowledge that you will soon be with Rourk. You have waited for this long; a couple more months will not matter."

Keegan tried to collect herself. She knew her mother was right, it just really sucked. "Oh, and we'll be spending your birthday in Ireland."

Glaring harshly at her mother, Keegan said, "You want to keep us apart that much, you will send me to another country?"

"On the contrary daughter, Rourk will also be in Ireland. Our whole family will be there. Soldiers will need healing and some of our other gifts might come in handy."

Keegan was speechless.

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The next day Keegan was lost in her thoughts, her locker door open while she stared blankly at her own face in the mirror. Donald approached her, his hands shoved in his pockets.

"Hey Keegan, want to hang out this weekend?"

"Um, yeah, maybe." She went back to her thoughts without even looking at him. *They were going to Ireland to for the great battle. It was going to begin on her birthday. How could this be so? Did they actually stand a chance of winning against the dark elves?*

A shocked look crossed his face right before he bolted.

Keegan looked up in surprise. He was probably mad because she had been ignoring him lately. Whatever, she had more important things going on than high school drama.

## CHAPTER 14

Richard could see his men were tired. He had yet to tell them that the great battle was upon them. Of course, they all expected as much since they had increased the training schedule so drastically. They knew they were going to Ireland for a training mission and nothing more. He would inform them of the truth before they flew out. It wasn't that he didn't trust his men. It was the issue of their relatives with the gift. Many had the ability to read minds. They had been training night and day and everyone missed their families.

Richard looked at his watch and saw it was almost lunch time. He called Rourk over. "Pass the word that there will be a meeting in front of the mess hall in thirty minutes." This would cause a lot of grumbling from the men. They all hated last minute meetings, and to cut into their lunch time made it even worse.

Richard stood and waited for them all to gather around. "I want you all to know that I appreciate the hard work you have put in. I know you miss your families. I miss mine, as well. Tomorrow I would like you all to bring your family members here for a cookout. Everything will be supplied; you just have to show up." He looked around and saw smiles on the faces of many of them.

"After that I don't want to see any of you for the following three days. As for today, you are all done for the day, go home and relax." With a few honest words, the spirit had gone from weary and fatigued to an overwhelming sense of excitement.

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Emerald was surprised to see her husband walk through the door so early.

"I noticed the men looked depleted so I sent them home. We're also going to have a cookout at the camp tomorrow. I told them to bring their families, and I've given them three days off after that." He had a look of mischief in his eyes. "So you know what that means?"

A look of annoyance crossed her face. “That Keegan and Rourke are going to be at the same place at the same time?”

Richard could kick himself. How had he not thought of that?

“Richard, I am too tired to fight. It is done; we will let it take its course. I’m glad you have some time off. I have missed you.”

His eyes widened. He hadn’t expected to get off the hook that quickly. “I was thinking we should take the kids to your mothers and go away for the weekend. It has been too long since we have been alone.”

Smiling, she said, “That sounds like a wonderful idea. Let’s not go too far though. How does a cabin in the woods sound?”

“Perfect.”

## CHAPTER 15

The next day the camp was bustling with excitement. There was music playing, people were dancing, and the food was cooking. Elfin children were running amuck all over the place. Rourk didn't care for this type of thing; however, he understood it was part of being in a unit. Richard knew that events like this helped build cohesion among the soldiers. Rourk had to admit he was enjoying himself, standing back and taking it all in. He loved watching the children play.

Keegan dreaded going to the stupid cookout. The only thing that made it bearable was she could take a lot of pictures. She liked to capture people unaware when they were in a natural state.

Her dad had left early to make sure everything was prepared. Her mother put off their departure as long as possible, but soon it was time to go. They were expected to be there for their father. Keegan wished she could bring her friends, but outsiders were not allowed on the camp.

Much to her surprise, Keegan quickly got caught up in the excitement. Hundreds if not thousands were there. It was hard to explain, but there was something special about being around elfin families, and she could feel the love and admiration all around. Couples were dancing. Laughter was everywhere. Kids squalled in delight.

Keegan smiled. It was the happiest she had felt in months. She snapped pictures as she made her way through the crowd. She thought she probably got some of her best shots ever. Everywhere she looked there were faces of joy.

Keegan looked through her lens and froze. Quickly recovering, she snapped a picture. He was as perfect as she remembered from the night of the concert. Staring off with a look of contentment, he was watching the kids play. Her heart pounded. *Rourk is here.* When she thought his name he turned and made eye contact with her. They stood staring at each other, neither sure what to do.

Emerald watched the interaction, and she nudged Richard. They both looked over, knowing there was nothing they could do at this point.



They watched as Rourk strode through the crowd. Their daughter was as still as a photograph with a look of awe on her face.

Keegan was nervous as Rourk walked toward her. What was she going to say? In an instant, he was in front of her. She felt his fingers trace the side of her face. She looked up into his grey eyes as he leaned down and kissed her.

Richard and Emerald looked away and allowed their daughter to have the moment to herself. They knew there was a real possibility that Rourk would die in Ireland. She deserved this time.

Keegan had kissed boys before, but this was unlike anything she had ever felt. It was the weirdest sensation, as if she had electrical current running through her body. His arms felt so powerful encircling her. The noise around them sounded muffled and distant. She had no idea how long the kiss lasted—probably not long, but it felt like an eternity.

When they broke away, Keegan looked up and said, “Wow, did you feel that?” She had never imagined a kiss could feel so intoxicating.

Rourk stared at her, speechless, with a look of adoration.

Suddenly, Keegan realized everyone was clapping and cheering, and it was directed at them. Her face flushed a deep shade of red.

Rourk, on the other hand, looked proud. His hand found hers and it felt as natural as if they have been together for years. There was no awkwardness; it was like they’d fused into one.

Keegan pulled him toward the games. She smiled up at him, “I bet I could beat you at darts.”

“You’re on,” he replied with a grin, “but don’t cry when I beat you.”

Rourk smiled at her after he won a second time. Keegan had her hands on her hips. “Best out of three.”

“Forget it, you’ll never beat me. Let’s go grab something to eat.” Keegan took off running towards the woods and Rourk followed. He laughed as he grabbed her by the waist and spun her around. They fell to the ground.

“I have waited for you my whole life.”

“Sure you have, I’ve seen you enjoying yourself with a few guys,” Rourk said in a teasing voice.

“Whatever, I’m sure you have had your share of girlfriends.”

“I’ve had none; you are my first and only.”

Rourk reached over and kissed her.

“I wish we could stay here forever, I think this is the best day of my life,” Keegan said as she leaned back against him.

Someone yelled their names. Rourk gave her a quick kiss and pulled her up. As they walked, elves kept coming up and congratulating them, talking about how they all thought it was so sweet Keegan and Rourk were able to meet before their time. The rest of the day went by in a blur.

When it was time to leave, her parents approached them. “Your father and I have plans to go away for the weekend. Your brothers are going to your grandmother’s. Would you two like to join us?”

Keegan gaped at her mother. Was she serious? Her heart leapt with hope.

Rourk replied, “Of course, we would love to join you. As long as it’s okay with Keegan.”

Keegan looked at him like he’d lost his mind. “I want to spend as much time as possible with you.”

Richard seemed kind of surprised himself as he looked at his wife. “We will have to call and change the reservations to a cabin with three bedrooms.”

Looking at them both, Emerald said, “There is a condition to this. You guys can have this weekend together, but you are not to see each other again until you get to Ireland, is that clear?”

The idea of being separated brought a pain to Keegan’s chest. However, she nodded at her mother. She understood that Rourk had to focus on the preparations for the battle. Rourk also agreed. They were both grateful for anytime they could spend together. “We will be leaving in two hours,” Emerald said, “so I suggest you part ways and gather up whatever you will need for the weekend.”

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Back at home, Keegan felt like she was floating on clouds—she didn’t know such feelings existed. Glancing around her room, she began throwing clothing into her bag. Her mother had said a cabin. Knowing her mom she’d better dress for the occasion. They would probably end up on a long trek. She threw on a pair of hiking pants, shirt and boots. She grabbed her necessities out of the bathroom and yelled to her parents she was ready.

They looked at each other in amazement over their bed where they were both folding clothes into duffel bags and smothered a laugh. Usually Keegan was the last to be ready and took forever making sure she would have the perfect outfits and her hair was just right. They could get used to this. Hopefully, Rourk continued to have this effect on her.

They piled into her mother's Land Rover Defender and headed out. Keegan had to admit it was a seriously cool vehicle. Her mother had been in one on their last safari in Africa and said she loved it. Her father, seeing an opportunity to surprise her, had one delivered to the house before they got back. It was matte black with rugged tires and a rack on top. Keegan ran her hand on the soft leather seat and thought she couldn't wait to have Rourk by her side.

Her father pulled into Rourk's driveway. Keegan skipped up the drive and knocked on the door. Rourk's father answered. Upon seeing him Keegan smiled and thought he was very good looking for an older man.

Keegan smiled and said, "Hello, I'm excited to meet you." She peeked around him to get a glance of the house.

His father opened the door wider which allowed her to step in. "You have made Rourk happier than I have seen him in a long time. He'll be out in just a second."

Glancing around the house, she was surprised to see that it looked as if it had a female touch. She expected to see a bachelor pad or something. There were dainty curtains hanging in the kitchen, and the living room looked warm and inviting.

"You have a lovely home," Keegan said.

His father replied, "Thank you, I have not changed a thing since my wife passed away."

*Ah, that made sense.* "Well, she had great taste.

He smiled warmly at her. "She would have loved to have met you."

Keegan's face flushed. "Thank you, that means a lot."

Rourk appeared from the hallway and her heart skipped a beat. Would she ever get used to his overwhelming beauty? He wasn't beautiful in the conventional way. His face looked rugged, angled with eyes that were confident. He looked exactly like what he was, a warrior. She could not believe he was all hers.

His eyes met hers, and a smile spread across his face. He quickly glanced at his dad. "I'll see you in a couple of days."

Rourk grabbed Keegan's hand, and she looked up. He was much taller than she expected—not that she was complaining; in her eyes, he was perfection.

They quickly descended the steps toward the vehicle. She felt like jumping up and down over her excitement for the weekend. They had no idea, where they were headed, or how long it would take. Not that it mattered, as long as they were together.

During the drive, Keegan asked Rourk tons of questions. Talking a mile a minute she wanted to know everything about him.

"What's your favorite color?"

"Green."

"Really? Green is my favorite color too."

Her father turned towards them. "Keegan, I think green is a very common favorite color for elves." She stuck her tongue out at him and continued on drilling Rourk.

"Glass half empty or half full?"

"That would depend on how thirsty I am." He smiled at her while she thought of his answer.

"Very clever, I've never heard that reply before." She leaned her head on his shoulder and they lapsed into a comfortable silence. Keegan looked out the window, wishing they could stop. She wanted to take some photos of the breathtaking scenery. She knew it was more important to get to their destination.

The drive took a couple of hours. Finally, her father turned down a narrow, winding road. Rourk laughed when Keegan gripped tighter on his arm as her father made a swift turn. Richard was a crazy driver. She would be glad when they could get out and walk. Twenty minutes later, they turned into a hidden driveway.

Keegan was excited; she loved going new places. It felt like they were going on a grand adventure. Ever since she was little, her family had traveled across the world and she was always excited to see new places. Even though they weren't that far from their home, it felt as if they were driving into a hidden oasis.

“Have you guys been here before?” she asked. She noticed the look passing between her parents. Both had secret smiles on their faces.

“Yes, we’ve been here,” her mom answered. “Out of all the places we have been this is our favorite. We planned to keep it a secret from everyone. This is not the exact spot. We usually come to a much smaller one-room cabin.”

They stopped, and her father said, “We walk from here, so grab your things.”

They hiked up the rugged terrain and Keegan felt like she’d stepped into a magical wonderland. The scenery was stunning with rolling green hills and sparkling sunshine that stole through the canopy to illuminate the flora on the ground. Keegan grabbed her camera out of the bag and started snapping pictures. Even though elves had adapted to living among human civilization, they were still most at home in nature. She stopped and inhaled the fragrance of the wildflowers scattered around her.

“Mom, do you know the name of this flower?” Keegan asked, bending down to train the lens of her camera on a beautiful lavender flower.

“No, sorry. I always forget the names,” Emerald answered, coming to a stop to wait for her daughter.

“Well, this is a dwarf iris. It’s named after the goddess of the rainbow. It’s also the Tennessee state flower.”

“Why did you ask if you already knew the answer?” Her mother asked, exchanging an amused look with her husband.

“Well, you’re always right, so I wanted to throw something out there that I knew you didn’t know.” Keegan looked up from her camera and gave her a devious smile. Rourk chuckled.

“That sounds like something your father would do,” Emerald sighed, rolling her eyes. She gave Rourk a sympathetic look. “Rourk, you have to watch this girl.”

“I’ll be sure to put her in her place when it’s needed,” he said, amused.

Richard laughed and placed a hand on Rourk’s shoulder. “Good luck with that.”

They walked deeper into the woods, and it appeared as though snow was covering the forest floor. That was not the case; it was the lovely spring beauty flower that blanketed the ground. Keegan couldn't help herself; she stooped once more to the ground, lifting her camera to catch the sea of white.

Richard glanced over at Rourk, whose gray eyes were trained on Keegan with a look that bordered on adoration. "You better get used to this, son. It takes two to three times longer to get anywhere with her when she has the camera in hand."

Looking amused, Rourk said, "I would wait forever for her."

Keegan was lost in her photography and missed the exchange.

Emerald nudged Keegan. "We need to quicken our pace if we're to get there before nightfall. You'll have plenty of time to explore the forest tomorrow."

Reluctantly, she put her camera away and wondered how much further they had to go. They kept ascending the trails, if one could call them that. She hoped her father hadn't gone off the path and gotten them lost. Her muscles ached. They'd been trekking a long time.

Unexpectedly she heard the tranquil sound of water splashing against rocks. A waterfall must be close by. She squeezed Rourk's hand.

"Dad, can we please find the waterfall?"

Glancing behind him, he threw over his shoulder, "You're in luck. We're headed in that direction. We are almost to the cabin."

They hiked another 400 meters or so and then her father abruptly turned off the path and into the woods. Keegan glanced around. *Oh great, we are lost.* The sun was setting, and she was starting to get worried. She glanced up at Rourk; he looked completely at ease but focused. He had complete confidence in her father. Rourk was constantly preventing her from getting smacked in the face with branches. She saw her father pushing his way through a huge portion of bushes. This was ridiculous; she could feel herself getting annoyed. It was no longer fun—she was sore and tired.

Just when she was about to say something to her father, she was stunned into silence. Hidden behind the shrubbery was a wooden swing bridge. She grasped hold of the rope and tentatively stepped onto the wooden slats. It swayed, and when she looked down, she felt a rush of

adrenaline run through her. She hadn't realized how high they had climbed. She felt like running across the bridge, but her parents were walking in front of them. Reaching back, she grabbed her camera out of the bag. The bridge was narrow, so they had to go in a single-file line. She got some great shots of Rourk and her parents. She wished she'd brought a larger lens. The distance to the ground was so far away, she was not going to be able to do it justice. This was definitely worth the time it took to get there.

Once they made it across her father promised it was not much farther. Thankfully, he was telling the truth.

Nestled in the woods like something out of a fairy tale was a rustic cabin. The boards were so weathered they were gray and looked old and run-down. Beds of brilliantly colored flowers were overflowing the front yard while the leaves of the forest behind the cabin shone in the sunshine. A single gravel pathway led to the front door, where her mom retrieved a key that was hidden under some rocks.

Keegan was speechless as she walked through the door. The outside might have looked decrepit, but the inside was immaculate. It felt like she'd walked into a page of a magazine.

It was modern and simplistic. The front door opened into a central great room, with a ceiling that peaked overhead and a wall that was dominated by a large fireplace built of river stones. A couch and several armchairs of brown leather occupied the room. The hardwood floors were dark with unusually wide planks.

"What kind of wood is this?" she asked her dad.

He replied with a look of admiration, "Hand-scraped oak."

Grabbing Rourk's hand, Keegan pulled him to the couch and sunk onto the leather. She wanted to explore the rest of the cabin, but her feet were killing her. A small sigh escaped her lips as she leaned her head against Rourk's shoulder. "This is what I want our home to look like."

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Keegan woke up with a blanket on her, and the house smelled wonderful. It took her a moment to realize where she was; it always a little disorienting to wake up in a strange place. Smiling, she remembered that she was at the cabin with Rourk. She needed to find

him. They only had a short amount of time together, and she had wasted some of it on a nap. What was she thinking?

Keegan walked in the kitchen wiping the sleep from her eyes and again was struck by the simple beauty. She would not have guessed a modern kitchen waited behind the door of the seemingly run-down cabin. Keegan had never seen anything like the flooring. It felt as if she were walking on a large flat rock. There were a variety of size and colors, and the texture felt wonderful on her bare feet. The ceilings were made with the same wood as the floor in the living room, and the appliances were all stainless steel and looked like they were professional grade. What surprised her most was the sight of Rourk standing over the stove, something she would have never dreamed of; and yet he made it look completely natural.

“Is there anything you can’t do?” Keegan asked.

Rourk turned to her with a wide grin. “I see someone finally decided to wake up.”

Giving him a sleepy smile, she threw her arms around his waist and leaned her head against his chest. She could feel his powerful muscles beneath his shirt. “What are you making?”

He ran his hands through her hair sending chills down her spine. “Well, I was going to make some rare steaks, but Emerald informed me that you are a vegetarian.” He had a perplexed look on his face. “So I went with spaghetti, homemade sauce and garlic bread. The cabinets and refrigerator are stocked with everything you could think of.”

She inhaled the incredible aroma of garlic, tomatoes, and other spices.

“To answer the question you asked earlier, after my mother died it was either I learned to cook, or we lived on frozen pizza and canned ravioli.”

Keegan could not imagine what it would be like growing up without her mom, and she felt a pang of empathy for him. “I’m sure your mother would be proud of the way you turned out,” she said.

Rourk stared down at her with a look of gratitude. “She would have loved to meet you. Anyway, let’s change the subject.”

At that moment, her parents came through the door. Keegan couldn’t help but smile. Her parents complimented each other so well. Just one



look at them together and you knew they were meant to be. She wondered if she and Rourk looked like that.

Her dad said, “Is the food ready yet? I am so hungry I could eat a horse. However, my daughter might object to that.”

Everyone except Keegan found his remark funny.

The food was incredible, and her parents didn’t hang out long after the table was cleared. Her mom told them where their rooms were with a look of warning and reminded that they were to stay in separate rooms.

Rourk looked insulted. “I would never do anything to harm your daughter’s honor.”

Emerald gave him a knowing look. “It’s not you I’m worried about.”

Keegan was horrified. “Mom, get out of here.”

They stayed up most of the night wanting to learn everything about the other and both gave condensed stories of their lives along with their likes and dislikes. They found they had a lot in common.

Keegan glanced into his steady grey eyes. “Aren’t you worried that this feels too easy? I was expecting lots of awkward moments when we met.”

Rourk smiled at her, his strong hands wrapped around hers. “I expected it to be exactly like this. My father once explained to me what it was like when you meet your chosen partner. He said your chosen partner was an extension of yourself. That without your partner, you’re only half of the person you are meant to be. When you connect with them, you finally feel complete. Until that moment, there was always a feeling that something was missing, but you can’t put your finger on it. Even though we’re individuals, it’s as if we are one. Of course, we’re not always going to agree with each other. We’ll have different views on things. A perfect example is the fact that you are a vegetarian. That makes no sense to me. Because that’s what you want, I’d go out of my way to make sure your needs are met. Chosen partners see the best in each other and help to bring it out.”

Keegan looked over, a little uncertain before she spoke. “I find it a little unsettling knowing I would do anything for you. I would give up everything to make you happy.”

He crossed the distance between them to place a slow kiss on her lips. Pulling away, he told her, “Keegan, I’d never ask you or even allow you to give up anything for me. I feel the same about you. If you told me you didn’t want me to be a soldier, I would reluctantly do as you wished.”

She was startled at the suggestion. “I would never ask that from you. That’s who you are, and I would never take your identity away.”

He smiled. “That’s exactly my point. This is the reason divorce is unheard of in our society. It’s natural for us to encourage our partners. Their happiness brings the other happiness. There’s nothing more I want for you than to live up to your full potential.”

After hours of talking, they unenthusiastically agreed it was time to go to bed. The bedroom was as perfect as the rest of the house. Keegan was amazed by the bathtub. It was like a humungous wooden bowl with pebbles around the edging. She couldn’t resist, and made the water as hot as she could stand and then she slowly lowered herself into the hot water until she felt her body relax. Her muscles needed it after the trek. Leaning her head against the back, she closed her eyes and played the day over in her mind.

## CHAPTER 16

Keegan woke to the smell of bacon which brought a smile to her face. Rolling out of bed, she reached her arms in the air for a good stretch. She was still tired but she looked over at the clock and noticed it was already 9:00 am. She'd gotten about six hours of sleep. She rubbed her eyes and debated taking a shower and changing, then decided against it. Instead, she went downstairs with her hair a mess and wearing her fuzzy dolphin PJ's.

Rourk looked up when she entered the room. "You are the most beautiful creature I have ever laid eyes on."

A quick glance told her that he was not joking, and suddenly her face felt hot. She'd been told her whole life that she was beautiful, but it wasn't until that moment that she believed it to be true.

Changing the subject, she asked where her parents were. He said they headed out a while ago, and they wouldn't be back until much later. A mischievous grin crossed her face.

Rourk laughed, "Now I see why your mother warned me. Go sit down, and I'll bring your breakfast. How does an omelet with cheese sound?"

"Perfect."

A few minutes later he brought her a plate with an omelet and some toast. Keegan smiled up at him. "Thank you, you're so sweet."

They ate in silence and savored each other's company, stealing glances across the table at each other and smiling when they got caught. When they finished eating, Rourk said, "Why don't you get ready and we'll go off in search of the waterfall?"

She ran over to kiss him and then skipped up the stairs. She came back down about 45 minutes later ready to head out, and noticed Rourk had packed a lunch for them. His thoughtfulness made her glow.

It took about an hour to reach the waterfall. It was incredible and must have been over 200 feet high. Water cascaded at a rapid pace down the rocks. Lush green foliage surrounded the falls, making them stand

out even more. Keegan felt like they'd found their own slice of paradise; it had a magical feel to it, and she understood why her parents had not wanted to share their special place with anyone. She quickly got lost in her camera.

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The weekend went by in a blur. It was the happiest time in her life. Keegan felt so grateful to her parents for allowing them to be together even though it was prohibited.

The journey home did not feel as joyful. Keegan couldn't imagine being without Rourk again. She knew it wasn't for long, but even a little time away would seem like a lifetime to her.

As if he could read her thoughts, Rourk leaned over and whispered, "This will all be over soon, and we will be able to be together. Instead of focusing on the negative, be thankful for the time we shared. When you feel lonely, just remember this weekend."

She smiled knowing he was right.

They arrived at his house, and there was no skipping up the path this time. They walked slowly and each dreaded reaching the door.

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Rourk tenderly moved a strand of hair from Keegan's face. She willed herself not to cry. She had to be strong. He pulled her close to him. Placing his hand under her chin, he tilted her head towards his and softly kissed her on the lips. Releasing her, he smiled. "See you in Ireland." He opened the door and closed it behind him.

Rourk didn't dare allow himself to look out the window when she left, and he was glad his father was not there. He didn't feel like talking to anyone. He went to his room and lay on his bed. Staring at the ceiling, he recalled the weekend as if he were watching a movie, and eventually the deep sadness cleared. He needed to compartmentalize and put his focus on the battle. The sooner they got this over with, the sooner he could get her back. That was now his primary goal.

Rourk slept for a while and then woke and went about his normal routine. He walked to the kitchen and made himself a protein shake. Grabbing a book and dictionary, he sat at the table. Scanning through random pages, he found a word he wasn't sure of. Reading the surrounding sentences, he came up with a definition and then checked

the dictionary and moved on to another. It was hard to find a word that stumped him, but old habits die hard.

Rourk went into his garage, tossed his shirt off and jumped on the rower. He rowed 5k, did 100 push-ups and 100 sit-ups and then 100 pull-ups and went back for another 5k row. Once he hit about 3500m he smiled. Keegan was awake and thought of him. Her thoughts no longer caused him distress. Now, he loved knowing he had crossed her mind.

Rourk finished up his workout, showered and headed into work. Looking around, he noticed the men were rejuvenated after the long weekend. It was just what they had needed. Richard knew his men well. They still had some intense training ahead of them in preparation for the battle. Rourk could feel the energy in the air even though no one said anything. They all knew the time was rapidly approaching.

## CHAPTER 17

Keegan walked through the school doors with a smile on her face. She laughed when she saw Spencer run up behind Donald and smack the back of his head. Donald took off chasing him down the hall. It was nice to see things were back to normal.

Lauren walked up beside her and tossed an arm around her shoulder in a hug. She had her curly hair pulled into a sleek ponytail. “You are glowing, Keegan, what has you in such a good mood?”

Keegan flushed, thinking of Rourk. She wished she could tell Lauren about him and the weekend; on the other hand, it felt like a magnificent secret she didn’t want to share. “I’m not sure, I just feel happy to be alive. I know that sounds stupid.”

“No, it doesn’t. I’m just glad to see you are out of your funk. It’s not as much fun when you are mopey.”

“Sorry about that,” Keegan said as they drew near to her locker. “I’m not sure what got into me.”

“It doesn’t matter as long as you are happy now.”

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The days before the battle passed quickly and before she knew it, Keegan’s birthday was only a few days away. The family started preparing for their trip to Ireland.

Keegan began to wonder how all the soldiers were going to get to Ireland with all their gear. So she asked her mother, who just laughed. “Keegan, what good is our magic if we can’t use it once in a while? You know how you can watch someone with your mind’s eye? Well, there are some who can do that with their bodies, which is called teleportation. The really strong ones are able to bring others with them. We have enough with the gift that getting the soldiers anywhere unseen is not an issue.”

Keegan crinkled her nose. “Then why do we have to take the long overseas flight?”

Her mom grinned. “Your father likes to get frequent flyer points.”

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Thaddeus looked around the camp. It was alive with chatter as the men waited for his father to arrive. They all had a feeling they were not going on a training mission, that they were headed to the great battle that was prophesied. It was a moment many of them had dreamed of since childhood.

A hush settled over the crowd as Richard approached the podium. He was dressed no different from the rest of them: faded green camouflage fatigues and a tan worn baseball cap imprinted with a skull on his head. There was nothing at all to pinpoint that he was the commander; it wasn't needed. The respect for him went beyond that.

“You've all worked hard to get ready for this moment. Hell, you've been training for this your whole life.” He paused, his face stern. “The battle is upon us. We go to Ireland, not for a training mission, but to fight the enemy. The dark elves want to remove us from existence. We will not allow that to happen.” Cheers filled the field, and he gave them a moment to die down. “I will lead you during the Great Battle—it's my honor to do so. I want you all to remember, even though you follow me in battle you are fighting for yourself, for your family, for our very existence.”

When he finished, the ground shook from the roars of the men.

Preparations continued; they were to leave at nightfall. Magic obviously had its perks. It would not take long before they were all in place. They were arriving a week early to get the lay of the land and have everything set up before the harvest moon.

When the time came, Thaddeus teleported alongside his father and a couple other men. The elf held out his arm so they could all grab hold and Thaddeus' stomach fell as the ground disappeared. It was a dizzying sensation. Streaks of color blurred in his vision and he felt as if he were on a rollercoaster, hanging on to the other elf's arm tightly. In less than a few seconds, it was over.

He looked around, trying to gain his bearings with his stomach still rolling. It was daytime in Ireland, so he took in the majestic scenery that would become such a beautiful spot for the horrors of war. The battle would be cloaked with magic, and they would not be visible to the human eye.

As far as he could see, the hills and valleys swept across the land in shades of green. The sky was a clear, brilliant blue and the clouds were picture-perfect pillows that seemed to hang lower in the sky than they did back home. In the distance, he saw the smoke from several farmhouses and the tell-tale specks of white on the ground that could only be grazing sheep.

He watched as his father began to go around, barking out orders. He had to be a constant presence for the soldiers. Thaddeus noticed he'd occasionally offer assistance with erecting tents or building fires. The men were already in awe of him, and his compassion only escalated him even more in their eyes.

They could have used magic to set up the tents and get everything in order, but his father knew it was better for them to set up their own camp. It gave them something to keep their minds busy.

Thaddeus walked up to his father and stood beside him, and they took in the scene before them. Men were scattered all over each doing something to bring the camp to reality. Tents were going up, weapons were being sharpened, fires being set, and equipment was passed around. Some of the units were singing as they worked. From an outsider, it would look like complete chaos. That couldn't be further from the truth. These elves were organized and efficient soldiers.

“What do you think son?”

“I think it's an impressive sight.” Thaddeus paused, and then said, “I'm slightly nervous to tell you the truth.”

“I'd worry about you if you weren't.”

“How long do you think it will take to prepare the camp?”

Richard smiled at his son as he scanned the fields of men. “We'll be done in two days.”

“Have you sent out a scout party?” Thaddeus asked.

“Yes. Some dark elves have arrived, just a small reconnaissance team.” Patting his son on the shoulder he said, “Thanks to you, we were able to get here first.”

Richard watched as his son walked away. He could feel his blood pumping through his veins. One of his secondary gifts was the heightened awareness of his body. It affected all of his senses, and it gave him a significant advantage in battle. His mind processed at an



accelerated rate causing his reaction time to be faster. The only person who knew of his gift was his wife who figured out on her own.

Thinking of his wife, he closed his eyes to check on her. She was reading a book to Warrick. He couldn't conceal his smile when he saw the title. Not even two years old and his bedtime story was "The Illiad." Emerald glanced up and smiled. She knew he was there. Their bond had grown stronger over the years, and they could tell when the other was observing. They could even talk to each other, but that took a lot of energy, so they rarely did. Just being able to see that the other was okay made their long separations bearable. They also had the ability to block the other if needed which allowed them a sense of privacy.

Richard had been involved in numerous battles in his lifetime, but none of this magnitude. During his time in the Special Forces he was in small man teams. Even with his time spent in the Army of the light, most of his missions were solo.

There were thousands of soldiers at the camp, and more of the gifted arrived daily. Women and children were among them. Some of the children's gifts were too powerful to be left behind. They would not engage in the battle, but there were healers and weather manipulators which would be vital to the war.

Emerald and the rest of his family would arrive tomorrow, the day before the battle. He was eager to see them, but also worried. It was unfortunate enough having to put Thaddeus in danger. The vision of Keegan dying was always in the back of his mind.

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Thaddeus and Rourk were together in their tent. It was small, barely big enough for their sleeping bags and belongings. They were lucky enough to have come during the least rainy of the seasons in Ireland, but if they hadn't, the canvas tent would do well keeping them warm and dry, even if it was old.

Thaddeus looked over at Rourk; he looked focused as he used an oil cloth to clean the blade of his sword. This was going to be the first real battle for both.

"Are you nervous?" Thaddeus asked him.

Without looking up, Rourk replied, "No, just excited. I want to make the dark elves pay for trying to keep me from your sister. I know I'm not

supposed to be excited, but I can't help it. Are you nervous? You have a lot of pressure on you. Not to mention, you are very young."

When Rourk's gray eyes met his own, Thaddeus felt the urge to be honest with him. "I'm nervous; I really have no idea how I'm supposed to pull this off. I have to keep reminding myself the burden is not on me, but on my gift and yet I have no control over it."

"You are very wise for your age."

Thaddeus shrugged his shoulders. "I've never felt my age."

"What do you think of the rules of war?"

Thaddeus stared at Rourk thoughtfully before he replied. "Well, it sucks we can't use guns. I have to admit I'm glad that fighting stops at nightfall. Of course, I'm happy with the fact that we can use magic. However, that also means they can use magic. What about you, what are your thoughts?"

"I think it's important that we honor our ancestors and keep with tradition."

"I agree with you, that is the most important element in all of this. Okay, well I need to get some sleep. Keegan arrives tomorrow."

"Yes, I know. Goodnight."

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The flight was long and uncomfortable. Eleven hours in such a small space had left Keegan feeling deeply unsettled, particularly knowing where the plane was taking her. She was glad when they finally stepped off the plane and into the bustle of the Shannon airport.

She had always wanted to visit Ireland but thought it would be under better circumstances. As it was, she barely had time to notice anything as Emerald pushed the family on to the rental car place, her face tight and distressed. Brigid and Katrina were unusually quiet.

The drive to the battlefield couldn't have taken an hour, but to Keegan it felt like forever. She wanted equally to get there for a glimpse of Rourk, but she also knew once they arrived, it would be real.

Emerald steered the car far away from civilization and deep into the countryside of Ireland. Keegan kept her forehead pressed to the cold glass, watching the small towns and farmsteads pass outside. The sun was high in the sky, illuminating mothers pushing their babies in strollers down cobble-stoned streets and laughing people enjoying a late

lunch at outdoor pubs. As they moved further in the country, Keegan was struck by the sight of an abandoned castle only a few feet from the road, and an old, crumbling church sitting on a farm where a young girl in big boots followed behind her father in the sheep pen. Life was moving forward around her, while hers was coming to a standstill.

They were all struck speechless by the scene waiting for them at the camp.

The tents seemed to go on forever. Thousands of soldiers were walking around in full gear, laughing and joking. Some were gathered around campfires involved in deep conversation, while others wiled away time by kicking a dirty soccer ball around. The air was electrified and filled with the sound of voices and clanking metal. Emerald closed her eyes and let her husband know they had arrived.

Keegan watched as her father made his way through the crowd and stopped to talk to some of the soldiers. She smiled as he picked up a gifted child and tossed him in the air causing the child to break out into a giggling fit. Elves made way for him to pass. Eventually, he reached them.

“You guys are a sight for sore eyes. Follow me and I’ll show you to your tents.”

Keegan glanced frantically around hoping to catch a glimpse of Rourk. She knew it was hopeless, there were too many people. The battle would commence at sunrise. Her heart ached knowing they were so close but it still seemed they were worlds apart.

After they had settled in to their own tents, Keegan decided to take a walk around the camp; she wasn’t ashamed to admit to herself she was hoping to find Rourk. She was surprised to see all the different types of creatures. A tiger followed closely by a lion and a panther almost knocked her down as they ran around her.

The tiger walked up and rubbed his head on her leg. She looked down and was startled to see human eyes peering back at her, and she couldn’t shake the feeling she had seen them before. The three big cats ran off, playfully swatting at each other and rolling around. They seemed to be circling her. The lion nudged her leg, and she looked down again and saw human eyes. She looked over at the panther and thought *this*

*can't be possible.* Looking at the tiger's green eyes, she said, "Donald? Is that you?"

Right before her eyes, he morphed into his human form. She had been around magic her whole life, so she wasn't surprised by the transformation, but she had never expected it from him. "How is this possible? What are you guys? I know you're not elves. Have you known all along that I was one?"

Donald shrugged sheepishly. "I overheard your thoughts the other day about the battle. So I called a few friends who passed on the word. Creatures of the light from all walks of life will be showing up."

She threw her arms around him. "Thank you, thank you, thank you." His face turned bright red.

When she glanced back, Sam and Spencer were standing there. "So, what are you guys?"

Spencer said, "Nothing as fancy as an elf. We are your everyday, run-of-the-mill shape shifters. You would actually be surprised if you knew how many of the students are creatures of the light. Not to mention the principal."

Keegan was indeed shocked. "What about Calvron?"

"Wizard," Donald said. She was having a hard time adjusting to this information. All this time she thought she was the only non-human at school.

"Lauren?"

"Fairy."

No, this could not be true. "Anna?"

"She's an unusual case. Her mom is a spirit walker, and her father's human. So we're really not sure about her."

This was all so fascinating to Keegan; everything she had thought she'd known about her world was wrong. She was also a little miffed that they had kept their secrets from her. Like she was one to talk, though—she'd kept her own secrets. "What about Katie?"

"Human."

Keegan sighed. At least something was the way she imagined it to be.

## CHAPTER 18

The next morning Keegan awoke to blood-curdling screams and the sound of swords clashing. The battle had begun. Looking around, she realized everyone was out of the tent except her. How could they let her sleep in today of all days?

Keegan walked out of the tent and stared in awe at the chaos surrounding her. She was too far from the battle to see the actual fighting, but she could hear it. The noises and smells overwhelmed her senses. The clanging of steel against steel, the screams, and an overall eerie feeling filled her body. The coppery smell of blood filled the air.

Just outside the tent, her mother was healing a wounded soldier. The soldier was so young; she immediately thought of Rourk. She couldn't allow herself to think that way. He would be fine. He had to be.

"Katrina, what can I do?" Keegan asked as Katrina hurried up to Emerald, a dark bottle in her hands.

Falling to her knees next to her sister, Katrina opened the bottle to pour into the man's wounds. "Grab some towels and bring them over here. After that, help tend to the wounded. I know you can't heal them, but you can do basic first aid while they are waiting for a healing."

Keegan rushed off to help. The reality of war was starting to hit her.

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Richard was in his element. His fingers tingled as he touched his weapon of choice. This time it was the Kusarigama, a sickle and chain combo that originated in Japan as early as the twelfth century. A thick fog blanketed the green rolling hills, reducing visibility to only two or three feet. It had gotten to the point where Richard was unsure if one of his weather manipulators had caused the fog, or the dark elves.

Many of the dark elves had chosen larger, heavier bladed weapons. Those weapons needed to be swung with considerable force to be effective. In the fog, they risked hitting their own kind as much as hitting the enemy. The kusarigama felt like it was alive. The way it blocked, entangled and then killed each opponent brought into its path was like a

dance, with Richard moving naturally along, exerting just enough energy to avoid tiring too soon. He killed many dark elves that day.

Thaddeus was grateful for the fog of war. One of the gifted had covered the battlefield in fog so that one could see the person they were directly engaged with. He could concentrate better this way. The one-on-one was better for him. When he could see all the fighting around him, it was distracting to see flashes of their deaths. His visions helped when he was facing off with only one enemy. A flash of his opponent's head flying caused Thaddeus to raise his sword and swiftly send his head flying, and then it was on to the next. He felt slightly exhilarated.

Rourk felt nothing. All that was running through his head was to kill as many of the bastards as he could. He had never felt so relaxed in his life. It was almost as if his body was floating, although he knew he was firmly planted on the ground. He wished the fog would lift so he could take on more than one at a time.

The battle raged on all day. Eventually the fog lifted; it didn't last too long. Scores were killed on both sides. The noise was deafening. Emerald was consumed with healing along with all the other healers. They saved countless lives, but there were also those that were beyond help. It was hard for her to see the young soldiers she was unable to save. The older soldiers she knew died doing what they loved. They would be remembered as heroes; it's what all great warriors hoped for. To die during the great battle brought even more honor.

Night descended upon them and relief was felt throughout the camp. Everyone was exhausted and in need of a hot meal and sleep. Keegan helped served food to the soldiers. The men looked a mixture of exhilarated and exhausted. Energy was definitely coursing through the camp. In every face she looked into, she longed to see Rourk's grey eyes, but it was not to be.

Keegan ran into the three cats. Once she approached them, they morphed into their human forms. They were talking excitedly between themselves about the battle and how it was cool.

"Hey Keegan," Sam said.

"You guys look like you enjoyed yourself," she told them quietly, still in shock herself.

“Keegan, it is amazing out there. I feel like a different person. I’m so focused, and my senses are hyper aware. I can’t really explain it, but it’s amazing.” Sam looked down at the ground when he finally stopped talking.

“Well, glad you guys are enjoying yourself. Be careful out there tomorrow. I have to finish passing out food. I’ll let you guys get back to your war stories.”

They said goodnight and continued on with their excited chatter.

Looking up and seeing the huge orange moon, Keegan realized it was her birthday. Usually she made a big ordeal of it, reminding everyone not to forget to get her a gift. This year she thought she would give up all her birthdays if they prevailed in the battle.

After helping clean up, she headed to her tent ready to fall into a deep sleep. Bending down to crawl in the tent, she was greeted with an exuberant “happy birthday” and a homemade cake.

Her mother came over and gave her a hug. “Your Jeep is waiting in the driveway.” Keegan smiled, but knew she’d give up everything she owned for this madness to end.

After having a slice of cake she climbed into her sleeping bag. She felt something scratch her, so she reached down and pulled out a piece of paper.

It was a note: *Keegan, I am sorry I could not spend your special day with you. I will make it up to you. Forever Yours, Rourk.* Pressing the letter to her chest she felt a tear drop down her face as she drifted off to sleep.

Later, Keegan woke to the same dreadful sounds. She grabbed her sword and headed out. They all carried weapons, even the elderly and children. The sun was already high in the sky, though it was colder. This day was the same as the last, and again she didn’t see Rourk.

## CHAPTER 19

Four days came and went. The loss of life was staggering. Keegan saw one of her father's best friends being carried off the battleground and it shook her to the core. She was sick of sitting back and waiting, watching as men kept dying, so she decided to get a closer look.

Keegan drew her sword as she approached. She wasn't planning on getting close enough to need it, but better to be safe than sorry. She was horrified by the destruction taking place before her eyes. Body parts were flying following the sharp sound of blades singing through the air. Screams of rage could be heard, as well as screams of agony. She was surprised to see the three large cats. They looked majestic out there—she saw Spencer pounce and swipe his claws across someone's neck, severing his artery. Sam's jaw was clamped on an elf's neck, and he thrashed the dark elf like it was a rag doll. Donald looked massive tearing through the soldiers. He took three out in the blink of an eye. They looked so fierce; she would definitely be looking at them in a new light from this point on. She couldn't tear her eyes away from them.

A loud roar echoed and Donald fell to the ground. She didn't think, she just ran, slashing her way through the crowd. She had to kill a couple men before she made it to Donald, but her need to reach her friend outweighed anything else.

His chest still rose up and down, but blood poured out of the deep wound in his chest. She didn't think he was going to make it. Sam and Spencer were moaning, although they fought on.

Keegan was so relieved when her mother pushed her aside. "Cover me, Keegan, and I can save him." Her mom knelt down and placed her hands above the tiger's chest. "The wound would have been fatal, but we reached him in time, Keegan."

Keegan filled with relief. When Emerald was done with the healing, the tiger lifted his head and licked her face, which caused her to laugh and she patted the gigantic cat. The tiger got to his feet and looked over at Keegan, then took off back into battle.



Keegan sensed an arrow soar through the air toward her, and in an attempt to evade it, she disappeared. She jerked back, her eyes searching the sky in the split second she had before it hit. Time seemed to slow. She could feel the pounding of the battle in the ground beneath her feet and the cool air brushing across her skin. The battle silenced around her as the sharp sting of the arrow shattered her awareness. Starbursts exploded in her eyes, an array of colors that faded to black.

Emerald looked over to where her daughter had stood, relieved, but just as she was about to move forward, she heard the body drop. When she looked back at her daughter, Keegan was on the ground, an arrow through her heart.

"NO!" Emerald screamed in agony, dropping to her knees and knowing it was too late. Keegan would have only fallen to the ground if she were dead. Otherwise, if she was only wounded, she would have appeared where she was headed. Frantically, she tried to save her, but her gift could not bring back the dead.

Rourk felt a coldness enter his body. He closed his eyes and saw Keegan on the ground, her mother sobbing, holding onto her daughter. Everyone engaged in the battle literally froze in place, swords stopping in mid-swing, bodies balanced as if in a strange painting. The only ones able to move were those attached to Keegan. They all raced towards her body, crying and kneeling on the ground next to her.

Thaddeus could not believe he was staring at his vision in the flesh. The battle was over. They would lose. Richard was also crying as he kneeled on the ground holding his daughter's hand, his other arm supporting his wife at his side.

Rourk felt a fury he had never known. In a quiet, dangerous voice, he said, "They will all die."

Emerald looked into his steel grey eyes and felt his rage seep into her. She stumbled to her feet, swiping the tears from her face, and grabbed the hilt of her sword. The heaviness in her hands felt real. She stood up beside Rourk. "They took my daughter, now I will take their lives. There will be no mercy if they are with the dark, they will die; women, children, or soldiers. They are no different in my eyes."

Together, the two raced forward, killing dark elves as they stood frozen and unable to fight back.

Rourk had no intention of leaving the battle alive. He didn't want to live if Keegan was not in this world. He would join her on the other side, but not before he avenged her death.

Thaddeus didn't know what to do. He was supposed to be able to save them from extinction, yet his visions kept coming true. He couldn't see a way out of this. It was too hard for him to push his grief for his sister aside. In order to think, he needed to be alone, like at home when he could go for a run and just let go. His sister had just been killed, and now, his mother had gone over the edge. Was the time of the light elves really over? He couldn't accept that. There had to be something he could do.

Richard silently picked Keegan up, cradling her against his chest. Grief seeped through him as he looked down at his only daughter. It was useless going after his wife; there was no stopping the rage that coursed through her veins. He could feel her agony inside him. She and Rourk were no longer thinking as soldiers. They had gone over to the side of the dark. Flashes of his daughter's childhood went through his mind.

*When she was five and he had followed behind her on the driveway, his hand gripping the seat of her bicycle without its training wheels. He still remembered the way she had fallen, scraped her knees, and stood up, brushing her hands off to do it again.*

*She was nine, dancing around the kitchen like a ballerina with her skinny arms in the air and socks on her feet. Richard recalled how she slid after one particularly hard twirl and knocked Emerald's favorite blue vase from the table. They had cleaned it up, the two of them, and hidden the shards at the bottom of the trash can. Emerald found out anyway.*

*Just a few weeks before, she had stood in the living room, rolling her eyes at his bad jokes. Richard had wondered then when it was she had become such a beautiful young woman.*

As he carried his daughter away, the battle fell into motion once more, continuing on around them. He didn't care about the war or their inevitable extinction, all he cared about was getting his daughter away from the scene of her death.

Suddenly, loud chanting overwhelmed the sound of the battle. Richard could not understand what was being said; it sounded like

gibberish. He looked around, searching for the source, and saw a woman walking towards them.

She had on a long white robe that was flowing behind her. Her brown hair fell down the side of her shoulders and she had an innocent looking face with soft brown eyes. She was almost translucent. Richard could tell he and Thaddeus were the only ones that could see her because no one else gave her a second glance. Richard also knew she was a spirit walker. He had heard of them but had never laid eyes on one.

Thaddeus whispered, "It's Anna's mother."

Gently, the luminous woman took Keegan from his arms continuing with what sounded like a spell. Keegan's body took on the same translucent sheen as the woman's. The colors started to come back, faded at first and then brighter. They were shocked when Keegan's eyes fluttered open. Looking up at his father in shock, Thaddeus whispered, "Dark magic."

Keegan's eyes slowly focused. She tried to look around, but her vision was blurry. The earsplitting noise was overwhelming to her. Her mind raced as she tried to figure out what the noises were. Who was holding her? She was being cradled in someone's arms. Panic rose in her throat.

"Keegan, can you hear me?" his voice sounded desperate. It sounded familiar, but she couldn't place it. Blinking her eyes a few times, her vision finally cleared a bit. She tried to speak, but nothing would come out. A wave of dizziness washed over her and then there was darkness.

"What have you done to our daughter?" Richard asked, stepping forward.

"I gave her life back. Your wife gave me my life back, and this is my repayment." The woman's voice was matter-of-fact.

"Yes, but at what cost? Only black magic can bring someone back from the dead."

"There will be consequences, but she is alive. Isn't that enough? I would do anything to protect my own daughters even if it meant using black magic. If you and your wife do not approve of my actions, they can be reversed within twenty-four hours."

Richard took his daughter back, holding her gently against him, and he knew that would be impossible. He could not take back the gift they

had been given. Whatever the consequences, they would work through them.

“Why is she not responding?” Richard said.

“Her body has undergone a major transformation, which causes sensory overload. She will be out for at least a day, if not more. Her body needs time to recover. I will stay with her while she recovers in case anything goes wrong. Your wife should be here; a healing might help speed up the process.”

Richard closed his eyes and mentally screamed, *Emerald, she is alive.*

Emerald’s sword was raised. Without pause she slashed, and another body dropped to the ground. She couldn’t close her eyes to see what Richard saw, there was too much going on, and it would cause her own life to be taken. Scanning quickly, she searched for Rourk. She heard his animalistic scream as he drove a dagger through a dark elf. She had to get to him. As much as she wanted to run to her daughter, she had to let him know. She worked her way through the crowd and eventually was close enough to get his attention.

“Keegan is alive!”

She couldn’t possibly have said what he thought she did. Rourk saw his opponent advance, and he took care of him swiftly. Looking over at Emerald with a puzzled look in his eye, he said, “Alive?” He couldn’t seem to comprehend what she was saying.

Rourk tried to process the information, and in doing so he let his guard down. A dark elf drove a blade through his stomach. Rourk looked down at the blood. Stomach wounds were the worst, and he knew he could bleed out slowly. Emerald efficiently killed the dark elf and they made it safely off the battle ground.

Laying him down on the ground, Emerald went to work. She smiled down at him, her hair sticking up wildly and a stripe of blood across her dirty cheek. “I don’t know how or why, but Keegan is alive.” Rourk wanted to jump up, but knew he must wait until she was finished. He would be no good to Keegan dead. He closed his eyes but saw nothing when he sought her.

“I don’t understand,” he said. “I can’t see her.”

Emerald closed her eyes. She couldn't see her daughter either. Had she heard Richard wrong? Closing her eyes, she focused on her husband. He was sitting beside their daughter's body. Her eyes were closed, and she was not moving. Sensing her Richard thought, *She is alive, but she'll be out for a while.* Emerald responded, *I'm hurrying, Rourk needed a healing. We'll be there shortly.*

Some healings took longer than others, and Rourk's was one of the longer ones. When she finished up, she helped the young man to his feet and they set off at a rapid pace to Richard's tent. Emerald flung the flaps of the tent open and ran to her daughter.

Kneeling beside her, she felt for a pulse. It was shallow, but she had one. Emerald focused every ounce of energy she had, and called forth her ancestors. She knew it could be done because her own mother had told her, but she herself had never done before asked for the ancestors. She felt them surround her, and begged for their help in healing Keegan. She smiled when she felt her grandmother's hands touch hers. Closing her eyes they began their work.

Emerald instantly knew something was off. She knew her daughter's energy field, and it had been altered. Keegan usually had a particularly warm energy that felt like the sun was shining directly on her. Now, her energy felt cool as if it were the air from a nighttime stroll in the fall. Emerald pushed aside her fears and focused on the healing; maybe when she was fully healed she would feel normal. There were three generations of healers working on Keegan, she would be fine.

The healing continued for well over two hours while Emerald sat over her daughter's prone form. It was the longest healing she had ever given. Eventually, Keegan's breathing returned to normal, her pulse was slightly lower than it should be, and she was still unconscious. What mattered was that she was alive; she would pull through.

Emerald realized that Anna's mother was there. The woman had sat silently through the healing, staying at Keegan's side as she had promised. "I don't understand. How can she be alive? You are a spirit walker?"

Jennifer gazed almost lovingly at her. "Yes, I am a spirit walker."

Emerald's voice was uncertain. "I thought spirit walkers just helped people to the other side?" She had a sinking feeling in her chest, and she almost didn't want her to continue.

"I used black magic to bring her back." Jennifer stated it as if she was worried of the other woman's reaction. Her tall, thin body slumped against the side of the tent, her unwavering brown eyes waiting.

"How could you have used black magic when you are on the side of the light? I have felt your soul; you are a creature of the light."

Jennifer took a deep breath, her chest rising and falling slowly. "My parents died when I was young, and my grandmother raised me. She was a witch, and she worked for the dark. It is a long story how she went from light to dark. Growing up, I was taught black magic, I didn't know there was anything wrong with it. As I got older, I realized that my grandmother was evil. This is the first time I have ever used black magic to bring someone back from the dead. When I saw Keegan was passing, my heart ached for you. I did the same thing I would have done for my own daughters."

Emerald looked up with tears in her eyes, "Thank you for saving my daughter. Do you know how this will affect her? Rourk and I could not see her with our mind's eye when we tried."

"I'm sorry," Jennifer murmured, shaking her head. "I don't know exactly how her body will react. There will be changes like the one you mentioned. We have to wait till she wakes up to see. She has a strong soul. The best way that I can think to explain it is that she will have a spark of dark in her. Her light is strong enough to keep it at bay."

Thaddeus was pacing the tent like a caged animal, avoiding looking at his sister as his mind whirled. His voice broke the uncomfortable silence that had followed Jennifer's declaration. "I need to be alone to think."

Richard looked up and nodded at his son. Glancing at Jennifer, he asked, "She will be out for at least twenty-four hours?"

Jennifer nodded.

Richard leaned down and kissed his daughter on the forehead. "Rourk, we need to get back out there." As much as it pained him, he knew he was right. Richard looked over at Jennifer, "We will be forever

in your debt.” He shared a look with his wife and marched out back to the battle field. Rourk followed.

Thaddeus felt like something was in front of his face, but he was missing it. Going back over the events, his visions had come true. Keegan had died, mass deaths including women and children, and yet, the light was still fighting on. They still had a chance, so why was he not seeing it? Why him? Why was he so influential in the outcome of the battle? What made him different from other seers? He was a seer and a warrior, that was the only difference.

He felt as if time was moving too quickly. He wanted to slow it down, so he could figure things out before it was too late. Night would soon fall upon them, and then the fighting would pause until sunrise. He had to think of something before then. He was not sure why, but he had a feeling his window of opportunity would close if he didn't figure it out before tomorrow. He should be out there fighting with his unit, but he felt it was his time to be a seer and to let the others fight.

Suddenly, a light bulb went off in his head.

He began to form a plan.

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*Keegan was dreaming. She was in a field of wildflowers. It was the most beautiful thing she'd ever laid eyes on, and it seemed to stretch on forever. As far as she could see, the bold colors of the flowers waved beneath a bright, sunny sky. She was running and laughing and she could feel the wind on her face. Stopping, she twirled around and around until everything became blurry. She heard a loud roar, and she fell to the ground, startled.*

*Keegan frantically looked around. She felt frightened. When the spinning in her vision stopped, she saw a massive tiger in the distance slowly stalking towards her. She was too afraid to run, and stayed frozen in place. The tiger approached and walked around her in a circle; coming to a rest, he laid down and stretched out. She reached for him, petting the beautiful animal.*

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Rourk was in the heat of battle, but he felt as if he was not all the way there. He knew that was an excellent way to get himself killed. He

needed to focus and be in the moment, but it was hard not to let his mind wander to Keegan.

*He was scared. Hell, he was terrified. He could not sense her. What did that mean? Had their connection been broken by the black magic?* He focused and screamed within himself, channeling the energy into a swipe of his sword as he took off the head of his opponent. He knew there was nothing he could do; he had to wait for her to wake up tomorrow.

For now, Rourk could take out his frustration on the enemy. He felt the calmness surge through his body, and once again he was fighting as if he was floating on air. The moves were so natural he felt as one with his blade. Countless would die by his hand before the day was over.

Night descended upon them and relief could be felt throughout the camp. The soldiers shoved food down their throats and exchanged war stories. They were still energized by the fight for their existence. The weariness had not settled in yet. Richard knew if this kept up much longer that was exactly what would happen.

Richard heard his son approach and turned to greet him. Where earlier the boy had been tired and drawn, with dark circles under his eyes, he was now standing tall. “Father, I’ve had a vision and I need to be brought to the leader of the dark.”

Richard physically took a step back. “Have you lost your mind son? I cannot allow you to go over to the side of the dark.”

Thaddeus spoke with firmness, not as a son to his father, but as a gifted seer to the leader of the light. “This is not a request, either you take me or I will go by myself.”

Richard could think of nothing that could change his son’s mind. He resigned himself to the idea. “Let me grab something to eat and we will go.”

Thaddeus eyed his father, “We will go now.”

Nodding, Richard grabbed his gear and they headed out. He hoped his son knew what he was doing. Just the thought of coming face to face with his nemesis, Creed, made his blood boil. It was going to take all of his willpower to follow the rules of war.

It took them over an hour by foot to reach the camp of the dark elves. They had chosen a spot set deep in a small valley between hills



where their own sea of illuminated tents lit the valley like the light elves. It was set up essentially like their own. He could see no real differences, but he could feel it.

Entering the area felt like they'd stepped into an air conditioned room. They were greeted by a guard in full gear, his sword tip pointing at Richard's face. Richard glared at him, "We are here to see your leader, Creed. Tell him my son has had a vision and needs to see him at once."

Those gifted with sight were highly respected. The man looked over at Thaddeus, and he almost bowed, but stopped himself. "I will be right back, you can wait here." Thaddeus and Richard pointedly remained silent; Richard, upset about entering the enemy's territory with his son and Thaddeus, terrified.

The guard quickly returned and said, "Follow me."

Conversation fell silent as they let the man lead them through the camp. Every dark soldier turned in their direction, following the three-man party with wary eyes as they passed.

Creed's tent was indistinguishable from any other and he even looked like a normal person; but Richard knew he was not to be underestimated. Despite his average face and normal brown hair, he was dangerous. You do not get to be the leader of the dark without merit.

Creed glanced up when they walked in, and he nodded slightly at them both, his blue eyes hard. "I've heard you've had a vision and need to see me?"

Thaddeus stepped forward, "Sir, my vision has shown that if we continue on with this war we will all die. We are both equally matched. If you added up the numbers of the dead right now, you will see they are the same. This battle will effectively cause extinction to our kind, both light and dark. My vision showed me the only way to stop this is to call a truce. I have also made some connections on my own, if you care to hear them."

Creed waved his hand at Thaddeus to continue, one eyebrow raised sardonically.

"Who is to say that light is just and dark is evil? What if light is just light and dark is just dark. What if we have been brainwashed to believe we should hate each other? Today with my own eyes I saw my mother and future brother-in-law cross over to the side of the dark. They were

no longer fighting for good or to save their kind. They were fueled on pure revenge. I also witnessed with my own eyes my sister being brought back to life by black magic. Does that mean she is evil now? I cannot believe that to be the case. I look around your camp and see your soldiers are the same as our soldiers. We are all fighting for something we believe in. What if what we believe in has been false all along? I do not suggest that we become friends. I do suggest that we show each other the respect we both deserve. Why are we killing off our own race—we are all elves, are we not?”

Creed stood up and paced the room quietly for a moment, his hands clasped behind his back. When he looked up, his face was filled with emotion. “My son died today. He did not even believe in war; he thought we should sit down and discuss our differences and work it out amicably. I laughed at him and told him he was foolish. When I heard the news that he was dead all I could think was, for what? I couldn’t even feel a sense of pride for my son who died in battle. I knew in his heart that he did not agree with it.”

Richard tried to hold on to his contempt for the man, but at his words, he was unable to do anything but remember the feeling of losing Keegan. He felt something he never thought he would feel for the man he had hated most of his life: compassion. He knew what it felt like to lose a child even if his loss was only briefly. Maybe Thaddeus was right, and they weren’t so different after all. He had let his contempt for the dark consume him. He never thought of them as individuals.

“Creed, you know that my son was prophesied as the only chance the light had to survive. I think we should take heed his advice and his vision. Being a great warrior yourself, you know there is a time when calling a truce is necessary, and the right thing to do. I believe this is the time and place.”

Creed almost grinned. “I’ve always heard you were a smooth leader. I actually felt a sense of pride just now, hearing you call me a great warrior. Do you know I have spent most of my adult life hating you? I have lain awake countless nights waiting for this moment, for us to be face to face. I’d go over all the different ways I would kill you if given the chance. Yet, here we are both complimenting each other. Even with my hatred for you there was always a hint of admiration as well.”

The two men stared at each other, and Richard extended his hand out. Creed grasped his hand and they shook. "A truce it is," Creed said.

Richard returned the man's grin, clapping his hands together. "Now that we are no longer fighting each other, we can put our skills to work protecting the human race."

Creed laughed loudly. "Yes, I miss the days when you could kill at night."

"Ah, yes, the Elven laws. In the human world, battles do not end at nightfall." Richard smiled as he spoke.

Creed replied. "The humans seem to be on the brink of causing their own extinction. I think directing our talents and energy in that direction sounds like a good idea." Creed looked warmly over at Thaddeus.

"Thank you son, your gift as a seer has saved us all. I will strongly consider your words. The hatred that has been spread will not go away overnight. Probably, not even in our generation. Perhaps one day dark and light elves will see each other as elves and nothing more. Now go spread the word the battle has ended in a truce due to your vision. We all respect magic, so I think everyone will feel joy to know the Gods have decided to bring this to an end."

Thaddeus was relieved that it was over with. He had been stressed wondering if his plan would work. As they walked out, his father put his arm around his son and they left the camp in silence.

Once they were on the grounds of the light, Richard stopped and looked at his son. "There was no vision was there?"

An impish grin spread across Thaddeus' face. "Strategy number 23: Weave a Seamless Blend of Fact and Fiction, from *The 33 Strategies of War* by Robert Greene."

Richard pulled his son into a hug. Thaddeus continued, "You always taught me that your mind was the best tool during a battle. It finally dawned on me the reason I could affect the outcome of the battle was not because I have the gift of sight, but because of I have the mind of a warrior. For that, I thank you. I believed everything I said to him about my thoughts on the light and dark."

Richard stared at the ground for a minute. "Thaddeus, you opened my eyes to a new line of thought. With all my knowledge, I somehow managed to overlook the obvious. I am humbled to be your father."

Thaddeus chuckled, “Let’s not go overboard, Dad, you and humble do not go together.”

## CHAPTER 20

The next morning the sun rose, and activity could be heard throughout the camp. Tents were being taken down, and people were heading home. The family sat patiently waiting. There was no talking; no one knew what to say. Three more hours passed and then it happened.

Opening her eyes, Keegan rubbed her face and stretched. Thaddeus jokingly said, “Leave it to you to sleep in the day you come back to life.”

Keegan looked puzzled. Looking over at her mother, she said, “Is there anything to eat around here? I’m in the mood for bacon and eggs.” Everyone laughed, and you could feel the tension lift.

Rourk still looked concerned. “Bacon? You’re a vegetarian.”

Keegan glanced over, eyeing him speculatively. “Who are you, and why would I be a vegetarian?”

Rourk felt as if he had been stabbed through the heart. How could she not know who he was? His worst nightmare was coming true. Maybe she just needed time to adjust. “My name is Rourk. I work with your father, and your brother was one of my students.”

This seemed to bore her. She looked over at Anna’s mother, “What are you doing here?”

Jennifer stood up and walked over to her. “Your mother will explain. I am glad you are okay. If you need anything, or just want to talk, you know where to find me.” Then she was gone. Anna’s mother was a creature of the light? Why was everyone staring at her? The tent was filled with her family members. Kat looked like she was wanted to cry, and Brigid looked like she had something to say, but wasn’t sure how to say it. Even her grandmother seemed to be at a loss for words. Keegan was starting to get concerned.

Emerald wasn’t sure what to do. “Why don’t you get out of bed and come out and get something to eat? You might feel better when we are outside.”

Keegan got out of bed and wrapped her arms around herself. She was so cold. “Okay, but let me grab a sweater.”

They all walked out in silence. Keegan looked around at all the tents being removed. “What is going on? Did we win?”

Richard stepped in, “Long story short, we called a truce. The war is over.”

After taking a second to process the information, she said, “That’s good.” Her mind felt fuzzy. She figured she would feel better after some coffee and food. The bacon tasted so good she felt like she could eat a plate full. She downed three cups of coffee.

Her mother was concerned. She reached over to place a hand to Keegan’s forehead. “How are you feeling?”

Surprised, Keegan pulled away, wrinkling her nose. “I feel fine just a little cold and still tired. Why is everyone coddling me?”

“What is the last thing you remember about yesterday?” Emerald asked her softly.

Keegan thought that was an odd question to ask. Concentrating, she thought back. “I remember Donald almost dying and you saved him. How is he?”

Taking a deep breath, her mother moved closer and put a hand on her daughter’s shoulder. “There is something we need to tell you.”

“Okay, what is going on and why is everyone acting so strangely?”

“As we were walking away from the battle after healing Donald, you were struck by an arrow.”

Snapping her head towards, her mother she said, “I was what?”

“You have been unconscious for over twenty-four hours. Keegan, the arrow went through your heart and killed you.”

Keegan looked at her mother as if she had lost her mind. “What in the world are you talking about? Dad, is there something wrong with mom?”

Staring at her with a look that could only be described as empathy, he said, “She is telling the truth. Anna’s mother brought you back to life.”

Standing up quickly, Keegan knocked over the chair, trying to wrap her mind around what they were saying. “You can only be brought back

from the dead with black magic. Are you saying that Anna's mother is a dark witch?"

"She is not a dark witch, but her grandmother was and taught her spells. We are very grateful that you were given a second chance at life." Her father watched her carefully as if he was afraid of her reaction.

"How long was I dead?" The sound of disbelief was still there. She half expected them to tell her it was a practical joke.

"Only a few moments or at least that is how it seemed. Anna's mother appeared and was chanting, and the next thing we knew your eyes opened," Richard told her, rubbing a hand over his forehead without looking at her.

"Keegan, do you recall anything during the time you were passed out?" Her mother was looking at her curiously like she was some kind of science experiment. If Keegan hadn't felt so weird and out of sorts, she probably would have been mad.

"I had a dream. I was in a field of flowers, I felt free and happy. A tiger was with me."

Rourk flinched. "Keegan, do you really not know who I am?"

She stared at him trying to feel a tinge of recognition, but she felt nothing. He was cute though, that was for sure.

"Should I know you?"

Rourk inhaled sharply closing his eyes he sat back in the chair. "I am your chosen."

"That's impossible. We cannot meet our chosen until we are 18."

Emerald was deeply concerned. "Keegan, he is telling the truth. Under unusual circumstances you met early. You even spent a weekend with him at a cabin with your father and I."

Okay, this was getting weirder and weirder. Maybe she was still dreaming. As if her parents would allow her to spend a weekend with a guy. "I asked you how Donald was doing, and no one has told me."

Rourk got up and walked out of the tent. He had to get out of there before he lost control. He felt like throwing things and screaming at the top of his lungs. He wished the battle was still on; he felt a deep need to destroy anything and everything in his path.

*Calm down*, he told himself. *Don't let your emotions take control of your mind*. He knew he had to take a step back.

Thaddeus walked out of the tent and joined Rourk. He stood silently beside him, not knowing what to say.

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They packed up their belongings and headed back home. Normally, they would have stayed and traveled while they were in Ireland, but they felt the need to get Keegan home. They hoped that once she was back in her own environment she would feel better.

Once back in her room, Keegan laid on her bed, staring at the ceiling. It was too much to digest. She had spent a weekend with a guy she didn't remember? Looking over at her camera laying innocuously on her desk, she jumped up. If she had gone away for a weekend there had to be pictures. She scrolled through her latest photos and what she saw made her feel sick to her stomach. There were tons of photos of an apparently amazing weekend that she had no memory of. She looked so happy. There were several goofy ones of them where she must have used her self-timer to take them. It was obvious they were crazy about each other. So why couldn't she remember him? Ever since she was a child she had dreamed of meeting her chosen mate. She had woven fairy tales in her head of how perfect their life would be.

When she looked at Rourk, she had felt nothing. There was no connection or the chemistry she'd been promised. The pictures were proof that there once were a lot of feelings between them. She wondered if it was possible for it to come back or if it was gone for good and what he must be feeling. It had to be frustrating for him.

More than anything on Keegan's mind, she couldn't stop wondering one thing: *Why did she keep thinking about Donald?*



## About the Author

Julia Crane is the author of the *Coexist: Keegan's Chronicles*. She has a bachelor's degree in criminal justice. Julia has believed in magical creatures since the day her grandmother first told her an Irish tale. Growing up her mother greatly encouraged reading and using your imagination. Although she's spent most of her life on the US east coast, she currently lives in Dubai with her husband and three children.

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