

JENNIFER HASKIN



THE FINAL  
RESCUE

FREEDOM FIGHT TRILOGY  
BOOK THREE







THE FINAL RESCUE

Freedom Fight Trilogy Book Three

BY JENNIFER HASKIN

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*Dedicated to:*

**MYSELF**

*I knew I could do it, even if they didn't.*

**FREEDOM FIGHT TRILOGY**

\* \* \* \* \*

**BOOK ONE: PRINCESS OF THE BLOOD MAGES**

[www.amazon.com/dp/B079P7DMQ4](http://www.amazon.com/dp/B079P7DMQ4)

**\* OFFICIAL BOOK TRAILER:**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P4hGpwX3Xng>

BOOK TWO: *THE QUEEN'S HEART*

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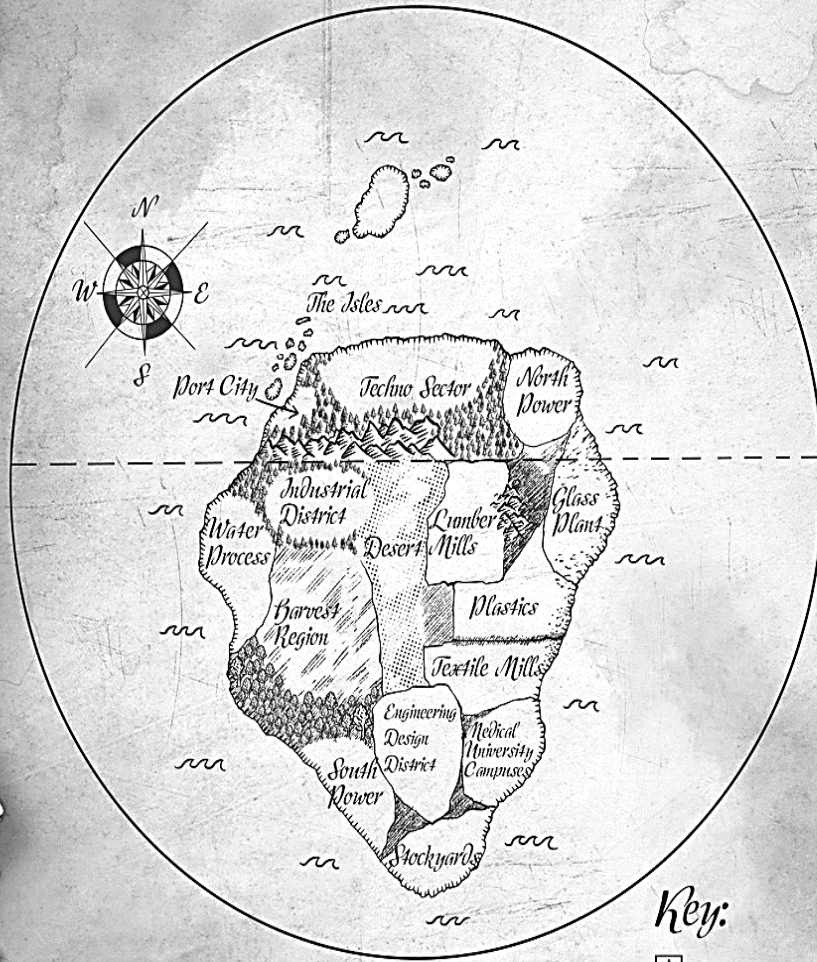
BOOK THREE: *THE FINAL RESCUE*

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# Map of Algea

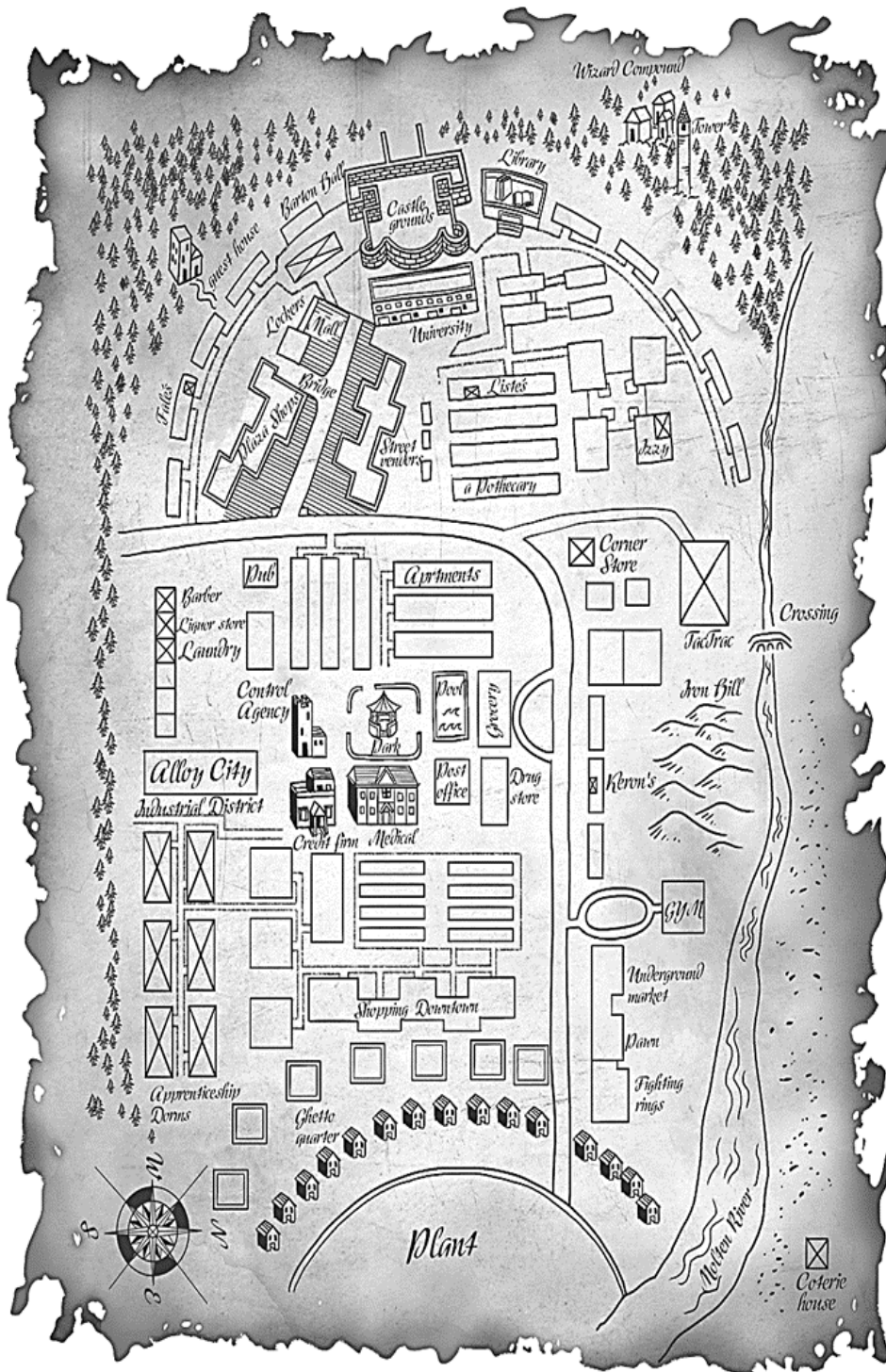


## Key:

-  Forest
-  Fruit trees
-  Grassy plains
-  Sand









## CHAPTER ONE

Gasten walked with purpose. He strode through the tunnels with the ease of ownership. He was looking forward to tonight. Keeping the peace in Alloy City just happened to benefit his cause. With his metal army, he would charge through new dimensions and steal their power for his own. Once he had the machine, of course.

“Damn her.” He remembered the visions he’d seen of her. Getting her apartment, stopping the fight for that guy... He wished he could have seen Fale defeat his best men. She was a mystery to him. But as much as she fascinated him, like a beetle-on-a-pin, he hated everything she stood for. And he wouldn’t stop until she was dead.

Caverns in the lowest levels of the industrial plant glowed dimly yellow. Furnaces vomited their heat in shivering plumes that chased the whirling shadows. The heat was repugnant to the Source Wizard as he wore his ceremonial robes for this induction. Tonight’s agenda was a man who had aided Fale’s group and could not escape punishment. He had worked for the Control Agency under Gasten’s own influence, and yet helped the mages’ cause by sheltering the group and proving himself a traitor.

“Good evenin’ Sir.” One of his cronies appeared as he found the right cave. He knew by the pleading.

“Please, have mercy. I didn’t mean any harm. Where’s my wife and child?” The man lay on a silver table, his body naked and bound by his wrists and ankles. By the time they were done he would be one of Gasten’s elite army. A soldier with human insides, a human face, but the rest made of a valezsan alloy, the strongest metal on the planet. He would be taller, broader, heavier and a great addition to the guards in Garrith.

“Ah, Teague. You know very well that they await you. Your wife is already recuperating, and you will be sent to Garrith together. I will induct you myself. Don’t feel too bad if you don’t recognize each other, though.”

“What of my daughter?” Teague’s eyes were wide with fear, like a horse in a storm. It gave Gasten a little thrill to be the source of his fright.

“The girl didn’t survive the transfer.”

A sob hiccupped through the man’s body. “You are a cruel, heartless ... monster.” Teague spat the words at him but couldn’t stop the tears from running down his temples to pool in his ears.

Throwing his head back, Gasten laughed heartily and then wiped his eye. “Why yes, I am.”

He was already beginning to have fun. This transfer would be the highlight of his week. The woman, Teague’s wife, had only lasted through the removal of the first few strips of skin before passing out, and she remained silent throughout the procedure, apart from some whimpering. No fun at all.

One of the men rolled in a cart. Gasten checked over the tools. Knives mostly, and metal parts that would be grafted to Teague’s muscles, a planer for the skin, and the glass enclosure for his heart that would be visible in the chest of his new mechanical body. Teague looked at the cart and started to cry.

“I can help you. I can contact the mages and tell you where Fale is,” Teague said, his voice jerking—nostrils flaring—with each panicked breath.

The man with the cart raised his hand to strike Teague, but Gasten held his hand out. His robe was suffocating him in the feverish cavern. He pulled back the hood, running his hand through long black hair that brushed his shoulders, his thick rings glinting silver in the flickering light.

“Where is she?”

“I—I—don’t know right now. The m-mages have her I ... I could find out, but I’d have to do it tomorrow. I c—can call someone. Yeah, I know

just who to call.” Teague’s head was raised, and he nodded in encouragement.

The Source Wizard Gasten tilted his head in thought. If he knew where she’d gone, he could go after the machine. The power he would have. He would visit every dimension in existence and dominate them. *I alone will steal their power.* His army was growing, and he would need them all. Keeping slaves in so many places would require a master with ultimate power.

But surely, she’d already found the machine. It had been months since he’d seen her vision. She’d never leave him a clue, of course, she would burst in with the machine and capture the slaves in Garrith ... then she would come for him. He’d know when she appeared. He had men out hunting for her. If they found her, they’d find the machine and bring it back to him. He had to have faith in his men. He almost snorted then.

He’d found his men in a dimension of idiots. He was surprised some of them even knew how to procreate. But they were loyal, and they were afraid, and that’s all he needed. They did all the manual labor in the wizard compound, and anything else he told them to. They knew the alternative; it wasn’t a difficult choice.

“No,” he said lightly. “I don’t think so. We’re here now and you will help me by becoming the next captain of my army ... You have betrayed your last human.”

“No—” Teague dropped his head back to the table and it made a thud.

“Please save your strength.” Gasten whispered a few words and ran his ringed finger across Teague’s forehead.

“Why can’t I move?” Teague’s panicked eyes were wide. He could speak, but his body lay paralyzed.

Gasten chuckled. “It makes working easier if you can’t move on your own.”

“No. No, please. Please, you can’t—” Teague screamed as they sheared off the first six-inch-wide ribbon of his skin.





## CHAPTER TWO

Half-way around the globe, Fale and her friends were on the island of Everlign in a giant cavern filled with blue orbs of light. They remained standing at Lisle's grave.

Fale couldn't believe—even after everything Izzy had done to hurt her—that she would actually try to *kill* her. But Lisle's sacrifice brought out a side of Izzy that no one knew existed. She'd succeeded in stabbing right through Fale's arm. She squeezed the bandage Keron wrapped around her bicep, feeling some relief from the pressure.

None of them would have ever guessed that the key meant to start the machine, would in fact, turn it off. She looked up at the huge tarragon behind her. She'd never have guessed the machine would have turned out to be a biomechanical animal. What good were her powers, if she couldn't save the tarragon herself? When they discovered it must be restarted by the transfer of another life the queen treasured, Lisle knew the sacrifice was his. She wondered if he was in there now?

At the waking of the monstrous metal creature, Fale began to cry in relief. Keron didn't know how to ease her pain. No one could bring Lisle back, the only thing they could do was move forward. She had to speak to the tarragon.

"Fale?" Keron put an arm around her shoulders. "You need to ask the tarragon if it will help us."

She looked up at the great beast covered in silver plates that shifted as it moved. The scales spread as it inhaled like a balloon, and slid closer

together when it exhaled like bellows. It was an amazing machine, alive and yet mechanical.

When its chest panel popped open to expose the beast's golden heart, a parchment drifted to the floor with instructions on how to give it life once again. The parchment had called the tarragon "Argyntus," which she thought was a fitting epithet. Her legs shook as she craned her neck up to see its massive head swinging around to judge the situation. She didn't know the difference between a huge winged reptile and a tarragon, but she wasn't sure there was one. It was like nothing they'd ever seen before. Not even in studies. It was the biggest animal in the world, in her mind. Massive wings, though folded, touched the cavern ceiling, showering her with pebbles.

She covered her eyes and stepped forward in trepidation. Though she could hear the animal telepathically, she spoke aloud in Tarra Song, the language of reptiles, "Hello? We have come a long way to find you; we need you to help us open a dimension to Garrith to rescue the people trapped there. Can you do that? Do you know where it is?"

"Mother?" She understood the thick accent as the animal cocked its head. "Is that you? You've changed."

She stood in shock. Of all the scenarios she had anticipated, this was not on the list. Technically she, as Queen Effailya, created the tarragon as her child, but that was lifetimes ago. Could the ancient tarragon recognize her in a new body? "Hello Argyntus. Um, I guess it's me, but I've changed, and I don't have all my memories," she said in the language of reptiles.

"It's okay. I'd recognize your magic anywhere. You said you'd come back for me." If a tarragon could smile, that's what it looked like with eyebrows raised and tongue out like a dog. "And you've always called me Argy. I like that best."

"Can you help us, Argy?" she asked.

"Indubitably," he answered, and Fale heard the echo of Lisle's voice. Tears gathered in her eyes and she reached up to touch the scales, imagining Lisle in there somewhere.

“Is that my father?” the tarragon asked. “I will help you and him. But the other lady is dangerous.”

“He is not your father ... yet.” Fale sighed. “And you don’t have to help Izzy, but she’s not really dangerous.”

“She’s not? She cut you.”

“Izzy’s only angry from love and fear, she doesn’t understand why what she does is wrong,” she said. “She’s traumatized.”

“Can you teach her?”

“I can’t, but maybe someone on the island can,” she replied.

“What’s it saying?” Keron nudged her with his shoulder.

“He thinks I’m his mother,” Fale said and introduced Keron and Argy to each other.

“What do I call him?” Argy asked.

“Just call him Keron for now,” she said. And to Keron, “Let’s get ready to fly our stuff down to the beach.”

“You can’t just leave me here,” Izzy yelled from her place against the wall.

“You tried to kill me,” Fale said, nonplussed.

“The mules will carry the packs for you Izzy, and we’ll leave the food and supplies. It’ll take you three days or less to get back, and we’ll send someone after you,” Keron said.

“I guess I can stay awhile with Lisle.” She sniffed. Fale gripped the beads on Lisle’s necklace hanging around her own neck. Part of her wished that Izzy would challenge her for it. She still had adrenaline left over in her blood.

“Argy, we need to get our bags from the camp,” Fale said, shaking herself out of the pain and preparing for the next leg of their journey. Now,

the fight would really start. Leaving Izzy and Lisle behind, Argy carried Fale, Keron and Argy's armor out of the cave, to the campsite. She didn't know how, but she'd win this war. She had to. She was already down two men—already losing.

~\*~

Fale and Keron packed their duffels and threw them outside the tent. "Should we take the tent and the bedrolls, just in case?" Fale asked.

"Might not be a bad idea," Keron said. "At least we can return them to the mountain mages when we get home."

"I need to get something of Lisle's. I'll be right back." Fale disappeared into Lisle and Izzy's tent and returned with his spell book. Lisle had called it his Grimoire.

"Why do you need that?" Keron asked.

"Lisle and I were working on a spell ... and because it was Lisle's." She shrugged and hugged the book to her chest. The tarragon cocked his head at her loving gesture. She motioned with her hand and Argy lay down. Using the handholds in the machine's side, she climbed up onto Argy's back to the ruby saddles. Keron handed her the bags, then they tied them on. There was a perfect place behind the saddles, in between spikes on Argy's back, that made a shelf with hooks to tie down and knot the rope.

"Can you fly us down to the beach, where our boat is?" Fale asked Argy. "We need to talk to the sage before we can leave."

"Yes," he said.

Keron reached up to grip the handles and ascended the tarragon, sitting in the second saddle.

Argyntus rose unsteadily into the air with several flaps of his immense wings and flew majestically on the ocean wind, Fale could taste salt in the clouds. He pumped his wings and they dipped, before bursting forward with immense power and speed. Fale threw her head back and laughed as Argy passed easily over the mountain they had climbed the



entire first day, circling downward and coasting to the beach with grace, flapping his wings to land. The island people of Everlign came running from their homes and work to see Argy and crowded around him, touching his legs and tail.

The sage met them, too.

“Did you tie the mules?” he smiled. “We will send someone for them.”

“Izzy will be bringing them down,” Fale said somberly.

At Udalrazak’s puzzled expression, Keron explained, “The tarragon required a sacrifice.”

“The young man,” the sage guessed.

“Yes, and Izzy tried to kill Fale,” Keron said. “The animal wouldn’t bring her down.”

“Tarragons are fiercely loyal,” said Udalrazak.

“You know what he is.” Fale’s anger flared.

“So should your sage, when she sees him.”

“But why did no one know what the machine was?” Fale asked.

“Real tarragons have been long extinct for more moons than some rivers live.” The old sage had spread his hands up to the sky in dramatic fashion and stopped to grin at Fale with a twinkle in his eye.

She blew the hair out of her face and crossed her arms, unimpressed.

He continued, smiling, “When Effailya made this tarragon, no layperson would know what it was, only someone with old books on magic. The same would go for today. Only Grand Sages, Bone Sorcerers, Source Wizards, and such, would have access to records of magical beasts that old,” Udalrazak said.

“Interesting.” Keron squinted an eye, and Fale’s eyes misted over thinking of Lisle and how often that was his response.

“Will you fly back or sail?” Udalrazak asked. “It is a long journey for the tarragon.”

“I hadn’t thought about it like that,” said Keron.

“I’ll ask,” said Fale, switching languages. “Argy, do you want to sail back to Algea on the ship, or fly? It will take us twenty-five days to sail. There are only a few islands to land on between here and there and I don’t know another way. I guess we could try to teleport there.”

“My wings aren’t very strong yet. I need some practice to strengthen my muscles, especially if I’m needed to fly in a rescue,” he said.

“It’s very possible you will be needed for a rescue, and for a fight,” she said to Argy. To Keron she said, “He needs the flight practice, but not so far. Should we take the ship and let Argy fly over the ocean and land on the deck while we travel?”

“Let’s ask the captain what he thinks,” said Keron.

Captain Kit, although terrified of Argy upon first meeting him, was amenable and agreed to the idea. So Keron, Fale and Argy boarded the Santavina and set sail for home. Fale gripped the railing and waved goodbye to the round-faced children; and to aged Sage Udalrazak and his wife, Jesselsyn. She would miss the faces she had met on this journey, most of all the people she had left behind. Fale had expressed her concern to Udalrazak.

*“You will grow from each person you have learned from,” he said.*

*“I guess,” she admitted. “It’s just so hard on my heart.”*

*“It is good to keep a pliable heart with some callouses on the outside. The thickness protects us from being so easily hurt the next time, and the soft inside helps us to remain kind.”*

*“Take care of Izzy for me. There is so much she needs to experience about love and kindness. Lessons that she won’t get in Algea.” Fale took his wrinkled hand in both of hers.*

*“She will change here, or she will fester until she rots inside,” he said.*

*“That’s what I’m afraid of.”*

*“She is not yours to worry about. Just like yesterday and tomorrow are not yours to worry about, you must focus on yourself, focus on today.” He patted her hand and they let go.*

*“You’re right.”*

*“Of course.” He grinned at her.*

*“What if she ever wants to leave Everligne? Are there other islands with people on them on this side of the globe?” Fale asked, genuinely interested.*

*“Why wouldn’t there be?” the sage asked with a wink.*

“Well, twenty-five days back again,” Keron’s voice brought Fale back to the present. She left her thoughts with the waves and pushed away from the railing, walking over to sit in a deck chair.

Once back on the freighter, the first thing she did was take a hot shower. After all the camping, she had learned to really appreciate the amenities. Just the memory of their time on the boat with Lisle and Izzy was painful, though. Swimming in the saltwater pool, eating in the dining galley, working out in the weight room and doing laundry, they’d had *some* fun together. Things would be different this time. She’d lost what childhood she had left. Now it was time to face the future.

“Yes,” she said, inhaling. “Twenty-five days to prepare for the biggest fight of my life. Twenty-five days until I must have a plan to defeat Gasten. My mind is so full. I just need a break.” She held her head.

“Would you like me to get your book for you?” he asked.

“Please,” she said. “I think I’ll read until dinner. I feel so useless on this boat. I want the plan to move faster. I want to know I’m strong enough for this battle.”

“Relax. Enjoy this trip. Recuperate from the drama. We have plenty of time to train.” He kissed the top of her head and moved toward the doors to the hallway. Fale pulled up her feet and hugged her knees while the tarragon sat on top of the shipping containers on the deck behind her, watching her.

“Mother?” he asked.

“Hmmm?” she replied, letting the ship rock her back and forth.

“Why are you so sad?”

“I miss my friend,” she said vaguely, not knowing how much Argy understood about his animation.

“What happened to them? Did they go away?” he asked.

“He died, Argy. Do you understand death?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said. “It’s when your parts stop, and they won’t restart.”

“Something like that.”

“Was your friend in the cave?” he asked.

“Yes.” She looked out at the sea through the railing and watched the horizon move up and down.

“Did the wicked lady kill him, too?” Argy asked.

“No, Argy, he gave his own life to save a lot of people. He’s a hero.” A tear slid down her face.

“I don’t understand,” he said. “There weren’t a lot of people in the cave.”

“Argy, *you* are the only one who can get to Garrith. You will save a lot of people soon, and your heart stopped,” she told him. “When I didn’t

know how to wake you up, I used the key, and it turned off your heart.”

“Did he die for me?” he asked.

“Yes.” She hugged her knees tighter, but gave Argy a watery smile to show him that she didn’t blame him.

Argy cocked his head. Fale could tell from the thoughts she heard in her head that he felt emotional about her reaction, but his mind was twisted with confusion.

Keron brought out Fale’s book and looked at her face but didn’t say anything. They both knew that if she wanted to talk, she would. She appreciated him letting her think on her own, sitting next to her and opening his book, silently lending his support. He put his arm around the back of Fale’s chair.

“Mother?” the tarragon called quietly, but she heard it.

“Yes, Argy?” Fale answered.

“I’m sorry about your friend. Someone should have told you that you only had to whistle our tune to wake me.” The tarragon sang a five-note tune that Fale recognized as a childhood lullaby her father had taught her. She’d hummed it all her life. But how could she have known it was in preparation for this journey? The irony of it choked her. Emotions so strong that they were nearly corporeal, squeezed like hands around her throat. She wanted to disbelieve him, but she knew it was the truth. If she’d listened and remembered, or if her father had lived, she would have known to whistle and wake Argy instead of using that damned key.

And Lisle would be alive.

The pain speared through her chest. It hurt so much. Fale couldn’t handle it. She broke down into gut wrenching sobs, letting the pain pound against her heart. Her chest expanding, growing in pressure, she doubled over and rocked in her chair.

Keron looked at Argy with a questioning glance. “What did he say?”



“Did I say something bad, Mother?”

“N-hic-no, Argy, I’m just ... very sad,” she told him in song, it was easier than speaking to Keron.

“Talk to me, Sprout. I can’t help if you shut me out,” Keron pleaded. “Don’t let anything come between us again.”

She tried to tell him, she wanted to, but the more she said, the more she felt like a murderer. “I never had to use the key, all I had to do was whistle a tune that I learned when I was little to wake him up...” Her voice caught on the word.

“Oh Fale. Baby, it’s not your fault. You didn’t know. None of us did,” Keron said.

“I should have,” she replied. “I didn’t even try it.”

“You tried everything we could think of.” Keron put his arms around her, but she just sat there, unresponsive to him and crying.

~\*~

During the first week at sea, Fale existed in a fog. She ate very little of the tasteless food, talked to no one, pretended to read her book, stared out at the ocean, took long naps, and floated in the pool. By day she followed Keron around and lay passively in his arms at night. The biggest difference between the trips to and from Everlign, however, was that Fale began to have memories of Effailya’s life.

Keron his gathered clothing while she sat on the bed watching him.

“I know this is going to be a problem and I’ve put it off, but I really need to do laundry,” Keron said. “I know that was our thing with Lisle and Izzy. Do you want to come with me, or do you want to sit on the deck?” He didn’t really expect an answer, just a shrug of Fale’s shoulders and a shuffle of her feet as she left, but this time she stayed.

“I’ll come with you,” she said in a small voice.

“Good. I’ll be glad to have the company.” Keron stuffed his clothing in a bag. “Do you have anything? We can do it together?” He wiggled an eyebrow, something that would have made her laugh a month ago, but she only smiled weakly at him.

She could tell he wanted to shake life into her, but she couldn’t force herself to “get over it.”

“I have a bag of things.” She pointed to the corner where she had thrown all her dirty laundry on top of a canvas bag. “I’ll get them.”

Collecting the supplies they needed, the two of them went to the laundry room. Keron threw the first load in the washer while Fale sat on the table and pulled her feet up underneath her.

*She was unexpectedly pushed into a memory, sitting cross-legged as she was, on a four-poster bed draped with gauzy material. She had been packing an overnight carpet bag. Getting up, she dressed herself in the figure-flattering gown of red silk laying on the bed and waited. When her love came to call, she put a blindfold on him. Again, Fale couldn’t see his face, just a blindfolded man with a tattooed hand. She whispered to him that she held a surprise and took him flying on Argyntus, still blinded, to Everligne for a romantic getaway. It was just like Fale had seen on the mountain side; Effailya had brought her secret lover to the island. Fale was attempting to see his face behind the mask as it came off... when Keron shook her to consciousness.*

“What?” she asked, irritated at him.

“Are you okay? You’ve been vacant for like, five minutes. I couldn’t get through to you,” he said.

“I was inside one of Effailya’s memories,” she answered.

“What was it about?”

“The queen’s secret lover.” She hopped down from the table and then leaned her hip back against it. “Someone she didn’t want anyone to know about.”

“Was it Gryndoll?” he asked.

“No, I have memories of him, too. They’re different,” she said.

“How so?”

“The big difference is the tattoo. The secret lover has a large tattoo on the back of his hand that makes it look like a bird claw.” When she made her hand into a claw to show Keron, a ball of fire grew in her open fist and burst from her, booming into the wall with force. The hole in the wall was small, but the charred area around it was huge, and still flickering with tiny flames around the edges.

“What was that?!” Keron spun around.

Fale didn’t know. Her wide eyes stared at her hand.

“What just happened?” Keron whispered.

She had no idea, so she shrugged at him. The scene made her want to laugh. She knew it was a big deal, but she couldn’t make herself care. “Beats me. Where’s the fire extinguisher?”

He reached behind the dryer and found the red canister, pulled the pin, and blasted white foam at the fire.

~\*~

They had been on the ship for thirteen days, and the water was smooth. The cook held a barbeque on one of the top decks for supper. Wait staff had planned the party for dusk, but the sky already bloomed purple like a bruise. Tablecloths flapped in the balmy breeze. Argy happily dove for giant tuna nearby and beat his massive wings to lift both his body, and that of an enormous fish, into the air. He rose then, gaining speed, and turned loops.

Music played and colored lights pulsed while the ship staff drank and danced, enjoying themselves. Keron rested his shoulder blade against a support beam to the top deck. He smiled at Fale, his arm around her

shoulders, a beer bottle in each hand. She took one from him and nursed it, handing it back. He kissed her temple.

“Having fun?” he asked.

“Mmm hmm,” she answered, giving him a half smile. He frowned.

Fale watched Argy dipping beneath the waves like a first-place diver. When he came up, he flew straight into the clouds, and she found herself remembering a long-ago flight through the clouds on his back.

*“He’s magnificent,” Gryndoll said loudly over the wind rushing past their ears, like the shushing of a mother to her child.*

*“Isn’t he perfect?” Effailya shouted back. “The product of great minds.”*

*“He may have been my idea, but you made him possible. I didn’t have the skill or the magic to do it,” he said.*

*“Keep pumping up my head like that and you’ll be able to fly me around.” She laughed lightly.*

*He smiled at her and Fale saw when he turned that he had long dark hair, caught in a ponytail at his neck, flying in the wind as they rode. His eyes were emerald green and his jaw was strong but sharp and tapered with a light covering of growth. Wow, too bad he’s evil, Fale thought. She got the feeling that Effailya cared very much for him, maybe loved him, like she loved Lisle. Fale felt like she was suddenly falling out of the sky, falling to the ground ... still falling...*

“Mother, are you alright?” Water sprayed her face and Argy’s worried voice reached her. Fale opened her eyes. She lay in a heap at Keron’s feet, and Argyntus hovered over the party, his huge wings agitating the party goers and dripping saltwater everywhere.

“I’m fine, Argy, go have fun. I was just lost in a memory and fell. It was a lovely memory of flying with you. I’m alright, I promise,” she said.

“If you wish it.” He flapped his wings twice, hard, and was in the sky once again. Keron stepped to the nearest table, set down the beer bottles and came back to offer Fale a hand.

A nearby waiter came rushing over and crouched before her. “I’m so sorry. Did you fall?” He held out his hands.

“It’s okay.” She chuckled and waved him away but when she did, magic flew from her fingers and turned the poor guy invisible. She heard the thump of him falling in front of her.

“Wha—what did you *do to me?*” his panicked voice called out, though no one could see him.

## CHAPTER THREE

In a round stone room with an open domed window, Gasten Vincroy sat in the dark. His favorite. He pushed the sleeves of his silvery gray shirt to his elbows and slumped back into a worn leather chair. He propped one shiny, scuff-free, black boot on the opposite, dark denim-clad knee, and lazily traced a thick black tattoo on his forearm. Forgoing a ceremonial cape, he wore the fashion of the times for a wizard of thirty, but with class.

He spent most of his time in this room. Files of spell books backed into the surrounding walls and built-in shelves, that were topped with healing crystals, enchanted candles, vials, herbs, globes, microscopes, telescopes, a sundry of bowls and jars filled with miscellaneous items, and the skeleton of a great lizard. The walls were blanketed with woven silk tapestries telling stories of history. The true history of this land. Secrets that the government of Alloy City had spent generations covering up and

forgetting. These tapestries used to hang in the castle, before it was transported to Garrith. He crossed the room and sat at the large oak table, the centerpiece of the room, where he held his council meetings.

On his own, in a rather pensive mood, Gasten preferred the inviting cool dark. He was trying to have a vision of Fale, as he had been attempting for days. Despite being nearly thirty, he had begun to have visions of an unknown, teenaged girl, close to a year ago. He racked his brain trying to figure out their connection, and how to stop seeing her visions. When he realized who she was by recognizing her key, and how having her visions could help him, he welcomed the intrusion. Gasten ran a hand through his hair and pulled gently on the hoop of silver in his ear while he thought.

She hadn't had a vision since the cave, and his wizards found no trace of its markers. All he knew was that she'd left Algea and gone to the Isles, but even though his men were everywhere, they couldn't find one white-haired girl. Since she'd changed her hair, she'd killed one of his men, but the other one notified him of her new disguise. He had people out looking for her, her fantocci lover, his double-crossing apprentice, and that society "it" girl, but no one had seen them or anyone carrying a large machine.

He tapped his rounded fingernails on the wooden arm of his chair. Jumping up and crossing the room, he ducked behind a tapestry to the dark space he used to house his grimoire and personal treasures. Laying the spell book out on his table, he ran his finger over the table of contents until he found a concoction for confusion, agitation, and an utter need for self-sabotage.

The wooden bowl he needed, he pulled from the shelf, with mortar and pestle, herbs and chalk. He stood at his lab table near the window, crushing potent dried leaves that scented his tower with rich odors of thyme and orange peel. After lighting his candle, he gently dropped a test tube into its iron holder over the flame. The spell was simple, a pinch of some sulfur powder, evernew, wormwood, and yew; stirred with a bit of ginger to add strength to the spell. When all was mixed with aloe and citric juices, it bubbled and turned deep purple.

The amulet on his chest glowed and the steam rising from the beaker curled purple wisps of mist into the air. He grabbed a glass sphere from the basket on the top shelf and opened it in the middle, holding the two halves over the

purple curlicues. They filled the ball and he snapped it shut. The instant it closed with the spell inside, it changed consistency to more of a soap bubble. She would never see it, but the bubble would find her and drop to her, popping on her head. She would never notice the purple gas swirling around her head, in her ears, in her nose, in her body. It would wreak havoc with her mind and her magic. He didn't care if he won by playing fair, or not. Honor was for fools.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Fale's mouth went suddenly dry and she hugged her knees, then looked at her hands. She'd never had her magic misfire ... or injure anyone before. She was afraid to hurt someone with her out-of-control powers. "I'm so sorry. I don't know what's happening."

She assumed the waiter was still there across from her, but she could barely make out the outline of him. Usually, if she turned something invisible, she could still "see" it, or where it should be.

"My hands. I can't see my hands. But I can feel them. I guess I'm okay? It's not permanent, is it? I mean, you can fix it, right?" The voice was panicked and loud. Fale didn't blame him.

"I don't think it's permanent. I don't know why I can't fix it, though ... I'm sure everything will be okay." The other crew members gathered around, staring at Fale. She realized they'd never seen magic before. It was all Gasten's fault. He'd stolen Alloy City's history for himself. If he hadn't banished the mages, these sailors wouldn't be shocked at all. She looked at their faces and saw they feared her.

"I'm not dangerous." She looked up at the circle of people around her and the invisible waiter. She asked him, "What's your name?"

"Asnah." He paused. "Are you a wizard?"

"No. I'm sorry, but I can't tell you anything more... For your safety, of course." She smiled at him but had no idea if he returned her smile or glared at her. Then she heard him snort a small laugh.



“How long will this last?” His voice sounded young and afraid; it pierced her heart like a blade.

“I don’t know,” she said, reaching out her hand toward him. “I’ve never done this before.”

He took it and she felt him shaking. She tried to make him reappear, but it was like her magic was faulty, as if she were plugged into her power by a defective cord. She let her hands drop and peered up at Keron.

“Come on, Sprout. Up you go. Did you hurt yourself?” He pulled her up by her hands.

“No.”

“How come everyone else gets full sentences and I get one-word answers?” He sighed.

“I guess they ask the right questions?” She smiled tentatively at him.

“I’ll take the smile anyway,” he said. “Do you want to stay or are you done? I don’t want you to overdo it.”

“I’m fine.” She stiffened. “I want to stay awhile and see if Asnah reappears.”

“We can do that.” He winked at her and disappeared to pop up behind her a minute later and wrap his arms around her. When the music changed, he led her out onto the deck and brought her close to him, resting his chin on the top of her head. They swayed left and right to the rhythm of the music and she stood in his arms until the music was over.

When he drew back, she was crying. “Fale,” he said. “You have to forgive yourself. You forgive everyone else; give *yourself* some mercy.”

“I can’t.” She pushed away from him and walked toward the hallway to their room. The fact that she still couldn’t see the young man who’d come to help her, deeply troubled her. She called to him. “Asnah? Can you come here?”

“Yes, my lady?” The voice spoke in front of her after a few seconds.

“Please accept my sincere apologies. I don’t know what happened, so I don’t know how long it will last, but I will make sure you are compensated if you must miss your work. Please come see me tomorrow so I know how you are and when the magic fades.” The speech nearly exhausted her.

She smiled at Keron and walked back to their room for the night.

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Keron let her go, knowing she needed time alone. What he really thought she needed was a counselor or another friend to process this with; someone who hadn’t stood by and watched it happen. But she didn’t have her best friends anymore. They were gone forever. Poor Fale, was she doomed to constantly lose the ones she loved? No, she’d gotten him back and he wasn’t going anywhere, ever again.

Three days passed, day sixteen on the ship, when Keron woke to find Fale in the bathroom, huddled on the shower floor in a pile of wet clothes and sobbing with despair. The waiter hadn’t reappeared, and it was apparently compounding Fale’s depression.

“Okay. You cannot go on like this. You need to talk to someone. If not me, then someone else,” he said. Keron shut off the cold water and wrapped her in towels, then picked her up and carried her back to the bedroom as her teeth chattered.

“I d-don’t w-want to t-talk to the d-doctor,” she said, her stomach quivering while she tried to stop crying.

“Why didn’t I think of it before? Why don’t you talk to Minova? You said she’s very mature and insightful, right?” he asked.

“Yes, but she—”

“Then talk to her. Please?” He knew he was begging, but things had become desperate.

“It’s too early. They’re working,” she said.

“Then let’s do it this afternoon, after tea. I’ll speak with Taran and you can have supper with Minova,” he suggested. “You can give them an update. I’m sure they’ll want to know all about Argyntus.”

“I guess.”

“That’s my girl,” he smiled at her. She gave him a fragile smile in return.

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Fale forced herself to exercise on the machines, had breakfast and went for a swim. Leaving on her wet suit, she ascended the metal stairs to the deck to dry off in the sun. She didn’t care about her tan, but the idea of feeling the warm sun on her bare skin was irresistible. She loved the little prickles of heat that ran up and down her back.

Fale lay on her stomach and posted herself on her elbows. Keron joined her soon afterward, shaking cool water on her back, already beginning to bake in the midmorning sun. He brought a pot and two cups from the galley, and they took their coffee on the deck.

Flipping over, she held her book above her for a while, then she lay it on her face and concentrated on the feeling of heat on her stomach.

*When she felt movement in her belly she almost cried out. She realized she was in a memory and wondered at the tiny life within her. She was standing in the sun, smiling, feeling the baby’s first fluttering. She was remembering that weekend in the Everlign Mountains with the claw-tattooed man. Fale knew that he was the father just as she knew that Effailya loved this child and would hide it from everyone if she had to...*

Fale put her hands on her empty stomach, feeling like there was a hole where there wasn’t one before. She was feeling very maternal when Argy spoke to her from his perch on the containers. “I’m glad you’re here today. I miss you when you’re away, Mother.”

“I’m sorry, Argy.” Guilt ran through her. She hadn’t thought about the tarragon’s feelings once since they’d boarded. “I’ve been very busy, haven’t I?”

“Yes,” Argy said.

“How have you been enjoying the voyage so far?” she asked.

“No one talks to me,” he said. “They walk quickly, and they run if I try to speak the words you taught me, from before. Maybe they don’t like me on the ship?”

“Your size frightens people. Do you remember this happening with queen Effailya?” she asked.

Fale had tried to explain the difference between the old and new queens to Argy; that they were the same, but separate. He understood as well as any of them did.

“I don’t know. When she and my father weren’t riding me to other places, I lived inside the castle’s outer walls, so everyone knew me.”

“Are you lonely *now*?” she asked.

“A little,” he said, “but I know you have an important mission that needs your attention.”

“It’s not that,” Fale said, “not ALL that. I’ve been lonely, too.”

“But why? You have Keron and the staff ... and I’m here.”

“I guess you’re right, maybe I am focusing more on what I don’t have than what I do have. Would you like me to fly with you tomorrow, Argy?” She sat up and looked at him, but as she sat up, and her arm swung to the side, a bolt of magic flew from her palm and the container that Argy sat on disintegrated.

He fell to the deck with a resounding thud that sunk their end of the massive deck. Crew members ran from all over to see what had rocked the ship. Argy appeared to be in one piece, but he and Fale were both shaken.

“Are you okay?” she asked him.

“Yes.” He snorted as he laughed. “I’m fine. That was fun.”

Keron joined him in laughing.

“You guys, this is serious.” She felt the tingles of terror on the back of her neck. “What if I’d accidentally moved my hand higher and disintegrated Argyntus?”

Keron stopped laughing; and so did Argy when she said it in Tarra Song.

“I don’t know what’s happening to me.”

“What was happening the last time your powers, ah, malfunctioned?” Keron sat up on his chaise lounge and faced Fale and Argy.

“Well, the first time was in the laundry room.”

“I don’t remember anything happening before that, though. Wait, you said you had the vision of the queen’s secret lover. Right?” Keron stood and paced, lightly punching his other palm.

“Yeah, that’s right. And at the barbeque with Asnah.”

“He’s been by to see you every day. It’s a bit creepy. I never know when he’s there and when he’s not.” Keron stopped. “You had a memory that night, too. Remember? That’s why Asnah was trying to help you. But what about today?”

“I had a new memory. I think that must be the trigger for my magic to backfire. But how can I control *that*?”

“You can’t,” he said and shook his head. “We’ll just have to be aware, I guess. If you have a memory, point your hands somewhere not dangerous.”

She flopped back onto her lounge chair, feeling exhausted. “How am I going to do that?”

“Mother, I would like to fly with you tomorrow,” Argy answered the question Fale had asked originally. “Would you tell me something?”

“What?”

“Any something, like a story.”

Fale smiled and lay back. Might as well tell him a story, she couldn't do anything about her powers. Plus, she had an epic tale to tell. “I went on a long journey from my home to find you. We descended a mountain, rode horses through the jungle, sailed the sea, climbed an island and we made it. We did what we set out to do—”

“How did you find me?” he asked.

“I had a vision of the area outside your cave and a sage told me I was describing Everlign. No one knew the island was there because the Everlign mages disguised it so well.” She chuckled.

“My mother sent me to hide in the cave after Gryndoll had banished her and all her subjects to another dimension for turning him down and making a fool of him. And I know he was so angry that she defeated his chances for a multi-dimensional army when she told me not to listen to him anymore. But after I flew away and hid, what happened to my first mother? She told me she would be back to get me one day.”

She was astonished at his speech. Argy had never sounded so ... so ... *Lisle*. His mind was trying to fill in the gaps. She smiled and it felt so warm, she could almost hear her cold stone heart begin to fissure. She told him about Queen Effailya growing old in Garrith, her subjects living as slaves, and then passing her consciousness into a new body.

She did not tell him how they thought the queen might have just switched places using a permanent form of astral projection, like Fale and Taran, but with a baby. It would have used all her remaining power to stay in that tiny body. The baby would die within her old body in Garrith, returning her powers, and she would grow anew. Maybe she got weaker each time?

“But why didn't the people become free when Gryndoll died?” Argy's silver eyebrows arched.

“That's a great question Argy. We don't know. I wish I knew why the Source Wizard hates mages so much. But I am not giving up on all of them.”

She sang to the tarragon all afternoon, answering his questions about Algea and the animals there. They talked about what it was like when he lived in Alloy City; it was called Sorche then. She reminisced about better times with Izzy and how close she'd been to Lisle. She told Argy about the first time she saw the ocean, and of her powers. When Fale got to the cave and what events transpired there, she stopped.

"You know the rest." She hung her head.

"I'm sorry, Mother. It was my fault."

"It surely was not," she said. "You didn't know."

"Gotcha. Neither did you," he said. "So, it must be no one's fault?"

She tried to find a fault in his logic, but there was none. If she was right, then so was he. "Hmmm, I guess maybe it wasn't? I'll have to think about it."

Argy left Fale alone to her thoughts and soon she felt herself drifting, drifting, into a new memory.

*She remembered making Argyntus. Gryndoll had found ancient tarragon eggs and they tried to grow one from cell regeneration, but it was not viable. They had used their magic together and one had indeed grown, but never developed thinking skills or lived without their life support. They let it grow as big as they dared, then she used its body as a model and took its lungs, liver and some other insides to make Argyntus. She used mostly titanium to form the framework for the new machine and Gryndoll had been there every step of the way. He was helpful and made the plans, then she found ways to build it or add to it. When Argyntus was ready, she had animated him and taught him to speak the lost language of his ancestors, the Tarra Song. They had been a family.*

Fale wondered what had happened to destroy their bond. Knowing how loyal Argyntus was, he would have turned against Gryndoll after the imprisonment of his mother, but what came between Effailya and Gryndoll? There had to be more to the story than what she'd been told.

Fale held her hands out toward the sea as she felt the magic pulse beneath her skin. She could feel the electric energy course through her with each heartbeat and as the blood flowed to her fingertips, she shot out a beam that hit the railing and turned it invisible. They weren't sure if she'd disintegrated it until one of the crew tested the railing and it was there.

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They sat in the living room of their quarters. Keron poured tea for both and handed one to her. They sat next to a plate of shortbread cookies in the shape of tree leaves, laced with chocolate. Fale appeared less dismal after singing to Argy that morning, and Keron was curious what they had talked about. He had to admit, it made him jealous that he couldn't be the one to restore her to her cheery self. He had heard his name spoken several times, too, and knew that they'd been talking about him, but he was nowhere close to translating their language that fast. He wished for an interpreter.

Knowing they would most likely stay in for the rest of the day, they showered and changed into clean cotton shorts and t-shirts. He lounged in the chair and Fale lay on the couch; she popped one of the cookies into her mouth.

“Mmm.” She grabbed two more.

“That good, huh?”

“They melt in your mouth,” she said. “We should save some for Taran to try.”

“I think he'd appreciate that,” Keron said, noticing for the first time in two weeks she'd thought of something other than her own heart breaking. “I'm ready when you are.” He reached over and smoothed her wet hair behind her ear.

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Fale concentrated on Garrith, on relaxing her body and projecting herself into spacetime. She felt herself slide past the fourth dimension into the realm of parallel worlds ... into Taran's body, and he in hers. She stood



in line with the other slaves, holding Taran's bowl out while a gaunt woman in a shapeless dress spooned out chunks of vegetables.

"Thank you," Fale said, and the woman looked at her strangely. Does no one say thank you here? Fale took her bowl over to the girls' fire and asked, "Minova, would you sit with me tonight?"

"Sure, Taran." Minova got up.

"Wanna go back to our hut?" Fale nodded in the direction of the huts.

"Why don't you talk fancy to *me*, Taran?" one of the girls asked.

Fale didn't know what to say. She couldn't speak well in Taran's brogue, but she could try. "I been practicin' my fancy talk is all," she said.

"For what?" one of the girls asked. The other girls laughed. "Are you goin' courtin'?"

"Thinkin' 'bout it," Fale answered. Minova smothered a laugh, both of them knowing Taran was going to kill her for starting a new source of gossip. Fale tried to make it better. "The queen is coming back with the machine to set us free an' we'll be at court again."

The girls got quiet. "How do you know?"

"The new queen talks to Minova. She's comin' for her da. She's wantin' to reward us 'cause we been helpin' rescue him from the castle." Fale said.

The girl looked skeptical. "When's she comin', if ya know so much?"

"She's already comin', but she's got a long way to travel first." Fale felt good to be assuring her people that she was on her way.

"I'll believe it when I see it." The girl crossed her arms. Fale hadn't expected her to doubt her. That hurt. She'd anticipated joy, happiness, excitement, but not hesitation. She was doing all she could to rescue these people from their lives in this dimension. She realized they had been treated so poorly; they would likely never trust authority of any kind again. And

how did they feel about her leaving them to find the machine for all these years?

“Come on,” Minova said, reading the disappointment on Fale’s face.

The tiny dark brown huts were close together and Taran and Minova’s was on an end row, close to the castle looming over them all, so they walked quietly.

“How’s it going, Fale?” Minova asked when she closed the rickety door.

“Awful.” Fale retold the story of the cave and how Lisle had volunteered to give his life for the mission, and how Izzy tried to skewer her. She finished with her hands in her lap, head hung low.

“So why do you look so depressed?” Minova asked.

Fale looked up at her in shock. “My best friend died.”

"Sacrificing himself for you, for something you both believed in. Because you're the queen. So be the queen, not a girl. What would Lisle think of you now? What would he think of what you've done with his sacrifice?" Minova asked.

Fale stared at her. What would Lisle think? He wouldn't want her to sit around crying. He wouldn't want her to throw away his gift. He wouldn't want her to ignore the beast that he became, even if it hurt. She lifted her head. "I won't waste his life," she said.

"That's the first step. Now, what would Lisle want you to do, Queen Fale?" Minova asked proudly.

"He'd want me to fight. I've always been uncertain about being the queen and he'd want me to be sure about myself. Then he'd want me to win this war. The reason this whole thing started is because the Source Wizard wanted more power and he still does. I didn't think I could defeat him, but it's his fault Lisle's dead. And for Lisle, I'll fight." Fale straightened her spine.

"Just say that to yourself whenever you start feeling down. 'For Lisle, I'll fight,' and then get on with life. Fight through it." Minova reached out and touched the back of Fale's hand.

"How did you know that?"

"When you're a slave, you don't have the luxury of being depressed when a loved one dies," Minova said. "You learn to work through it and fight for the ones you loved. You pour them into your new life and let your heart heal, not pick the scab over and over."

They ate their dinner and talked about Minova's life, and Argy's personality, at length. When it was time for her to go, Fale said, "Thank you Minova. You were just what I needed. I may not be totally better, but now, *for Lisle, I'll fight.*" She smiled.

Minova returned the grin. "Any time."

Fale sprang back to her room on the ship. The cookie plate was full of crumbs and Fale laughed. "He liked them, huh?"

Keron's eyes widened for a moment. "Yeah." He grinned at her happiness. "So Minova had good things to say?"

"She just helped me see what I was wasting and what I *should* be doing with Lisle's sacrifice," she said.

"Moving on?" he guessed.

"Fighting," she said.

"Just as long as you're not fighting me."

"Why don't you make a move and see if I fight you." She winked, and he grinned.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Gasten sat in his leather chair. He abhorred waiting, and tried to think of how to pass the time until news of Fale's group arrived. Maybe he should find himself some temporary company? Rising, he went to the window and looked down at the compound. The pathways were gravel and the huts that had wares faced the central lane. People passed one another waving. Girls held baskets of green onions and carrots and tomatoes, while boys played roughly, shoving each other into oncoming carts. The merchants yelled at them, shaking their fists.

Gasten leaned on the sill and lost himself in memories. There had always been many women in the colony, but he had never known which one was his mother. Some were wizards' wives, some were wizards themselves, and the rest were serving wenches treated like slaves, but free to go. So many of them had doted on his handsome father, cooking and cleaning for the two of them, making sure that Gasten wore clean clothes. He never felt the loss of a mother, rather he felt that he had had many mothers. Gasten's father was a "great man." Gasten forced out a dry chuckle. Maybe if he said it again, he'd believe it. Maybe not. He had been only a child of nine the first time he'd learned about his lineage from his father.

*"Oh, come on, your father is the Source Wizard. Surely you have more powers. Right? You're hiding them, like a superhero, right?" Gasten's best friend Caid held his books to his chest with his arms crossed, a hopeful look on his face. They were walking home from class.*

*Gasten hated answering him and ground out the words. "No, I'm not hiding anything. The kids in class are right. I am—"*

*"Don't say it. It's not true. You're worth twenty of those guys. It's so stupid, to judge somebody on powers like we're born with them or something. We're not mages." Caid shook his head.*

*“I’d probably be a weak mage, too. It just means I’m not trying hard enough... I guess.” Gasten kicked a rock from the path in front of him.*

*Caid’s hand shot out to touch Gasten’s shoulder but he pulled it back again, just missing the boy. “Nah, you just haven’t found your ‘neech,’ like Master Kazano said.”*

*“Maybe you’re right,” Gasten stepped a little lighter as they walked between the trees. “I’ll get better. I’ve got to.”*

*The colony of wizards had lived in the woods outside of Alloy City since the time of Gryndoll. Wizards typically lived in the castle with the royal family, but with the castle gone, Gryndoll built his domain adjacent to the grounds. The one window in the Source Wizard’s lab faced what was once the castle property and it was rumored that it was made that way so the wizard would be the first to know if the castle ever returned. But how would the castle return if the Source Wizard hadn’t made it appear?*

*“Uh oh.” Gasten faltered in his steps.*

*“What?”*

*“My father is waiting for me outside and he doesn’t look happy.” Gasten could guess how fast news would travel of his test scores. The lowest in his class. Image was important to Source Wizard Sirus.*

*“Do you want me to go with you?” Caid asked.*

*“No, that’ll only make it worse.” Gasten frowned.*

*“I could tell him about all the terrible things they said to you,” Caid offered.*

*“That really wouldn’t help. Trust me.” Gasten looked at Caid with pleading eyes. “I’ll see you after the weekend.”*

*“If you’re sure.” Caid sighed. “I’ll be here Monday morning.”*

*Gasten smiled weakly and nodded, splitting from the main path to the stone walkway that led to his small brick home. Each step closer to the porch set Gasten’s heart beating in a faster cadence. Leaning up against the*

*rough wooden doorjamb was a rugged man, over six feet tall and muscular; his arms were crossed, and he was scowling. He wore his black hair slicked back to his collar and his nose had been broken more than once, making it a little too broad and crooked.*

*He grabbed Gasten by the collar, causing his books to fly like newborn birds, dropping all around them. "Who are you, boy?" Sirius lifted Gasten from the ground by the front of his shirt to shout in his face. He could feel the collar ripping across the back of his neck.*

*"Gasten Vincroy," he answered, sounding more like a question.*

*"Gah." Sirius tossed the boy into the house. "I'll tell you who you are. You are the only child of a prestigious Source Wizard, who is the only son of a wise Source Wizard, who was the son of a great and powerful Source Wizard..." He picked up Gasten and slapped him, hard. "Do you get where I'm going with this, son?" he sneered. "You have a role to fill. So, stop playing. Stop embarrassing me."*

*"I'm not playing, father. I'm doing my best—"*

*Sirius backhanded him and Gasten flew back into the table. "Don't you see? That's worse. If your best is the class's worst? What a disappointment you are."*

*"Father, please. I'll try hard—"*

*"Let's see if we can give you some incentive to perform." Sirius began removing his belt. Gasten felt panic rise inside him like a hot air balloon, but there was nowhere to run. No one would protect him from this man.*

*He summoned all the magic he could between blows, but he had no power. As his strength waned, so did his courage, and Gasten promised himself that he would find a way to retaliate with magic. Someday. He had heard of forbidden spells in his father's books and hidden places, darker magic from the past... As his blood splattered the floor, he swore he would find the magic. Oh, he would find it.*

“Source Wizard? Sir?” Zechiah stood in the doorway of the tower, his arms loaded with three massive volumes.

“Yes?” Gasten shouted, annoyed at the intrusion and the turn his thoughts had taken.

“Your council has finally found some of Gryndoll’s writings.”

“Give them to me.” Gasten strode across the room with purpose and looked greedily at the tomes. “Where were they?”

“They were in his tomb at the catacombs.” Zechiah handed the books over.

“Hmm. I suppose the mountain air would be good for preservation of the pages.” Gasten leafed carefully through one. “Were there more?”

“Yes. They are coming. Seven in total.” Zechiah added, “Sir.”

Gasten raised an eyebrow at him. He hadn’t struck the man in months. It was good to know that he commanded such fear and respect. Just like his father—no, his father had met his end with a painful fall into their cellar. No one knew how it happened. How would they know? Gasten had destroyed the spell, vowing never to use it again, but he wished he had it now to stop these mages.

“Bring the rest to me when they arrive. I will look at them myself.”

“But the council—” Zechiah began. Then, seeing the anger on his master’s face said, “Yes Sir.”

“You are excused.” Gasten waved a ringed hand. He spoke a word in Crion, waved his long fingers again and the sconces came to life with flames dancing brightly. Gasten skimmed through full yellowed pages of brittle parchment looking for a particular spell.

Much to his dismay, the spell used to absorb the mages’ power was an old spell that Gryndoll had put into place that funneled the energy of the entire population to the current Source Wizard. He didn’t know how to take their power on his own yet. When he’d dominated the dimension with his

henchmen, they didn't have any powers to steal and it wasn't hard at all. But somewhere in these books, Gryndoll must have documented his spell.

“Zechiah!” he shouted toward the door.

The skinny man rose from his stool. Gasten chuckled at the irony of the hole in Zechiah's threadbare shirt. The man would have to add it to his pile of mending soon.

“Yes Sir?” He came to Gasten's side.

“I'm going out. If anyone needs me, take a message.” He stepped with purpose across the polished wood floor, down the stairs, and took the path that would lead to his old cottage. Once in the woods, he immediately felt like a child again and walked the path with trepidation. He remembered walking to school with Caid on cool spring mornings and walking home during the crisp fall. That was his favorite time of year.

Cider and merriment were aplenty around the time of the harvest celebration and he remembered running home to ask his father if he could join festivities with Caid's family. Gasten laughed without mirth. The memory was almost too painful for him. The one thing he'd always wanted, he would never have. He would imagine when he was with Caid that they were brothers and when his mother would hug Gasten, tears would fill his eyes.

*“You want to ... what?” Sirius looked up from a potion in his home laboratory, just a part of the house set apart for spells; and raised one eyebrow.*

*“C—Caid said I c—could celebrate with his f—family.” He held his hands in front of him to keep them from shaking.*

*“Family?” He spat the word like it was poisonous. “You want to be with his family?”*

*Gasten nodded.*

*“You have a family. And your family is important. You are above such things. You will stay here and do your homework. Unless you want to fail*



*another exam?" He narrowed his eyes like he was daring Gasten to contradict him.*

*"But Father, why are we above the festival? We harvest our gardens. It's—" He gasped as Sirius struck him.*

*"You don't get to ask the questions here. I gave you my answer, now you obey."*

*Gasten had to go outside where Caid waited on his porch. He couldn't hide his disappointment and Caid's shoulders fell when he saw his friend.*

*"I'm sorry, Caid. I wish I could."*

*"It's okay. I guess I'll see you in a couple days." He pulled his jacket collar up as the wind blew.*

*"Bye." Gasten watched his friend walk away and his heart hurt like his chest was an open wound. He would never know a family of his own. It was just him and the monster he called father, and it would always be.*

He came up the front walk and saw the red brick cottage as if for the first time. It was much smaller than he remembered; so much *less* imposing than it was his dreams. He walked around to the side and stood at the top of the concrete stairs. He looked for the door at the bottom, the door to the vault of mystery and darkness. He descended the stairs and fished the key from his pocket. The padlock swung from its ring and opened with a click.

He opened the door slowly as if he might disturb the dark spirits, but the only thing he startled was a mouse who ran away at the squeak of the hinges. Pushing in, he saw much of the evil lair was just as he'd left it. There were crates stacked in the corners and covered with a velvety cloth in deep purple. The podium stood naked; he'd taken the grimoire to the secret room in his tower. He was looking for something else.

Not sure what he'd find, he knew there must be darker magic down there somewhere. He pulled off the cloth from each corner of the room. A silk square was draped over an alter covered in melted candle wax, charcoal

markings, and black pools of dried blood. There was a sage for smudging and a mix of herbs from whatever spell Sirius was working on when... Well, the last thing he worked on.

The crates were filled with ceremonial objects and ingredients for potions that he could really use. A bit of joy crept over him at the discovery. Few of the crates were empty. One in the back corner, however, under everything, held a beautiful, shining, polished wooden box with brass detailing and leather straps. If he'd found it as a child, he would have believed it was a treasure chest. But the lid wouldn't open, even using his skeleton key. There was an engraving on the brass, but he couldn't read it. The words appeared to be in Crion, but tarnish warped the script.

Gasten looked at the heavy blankets on the floor with disgust. They were covered in dust and grime. He plucked the silk laying over the podium and heard a tink tink sound. He couldn't see with the available light coming from cracks in the black-painted windows. Candles were in one of the first crates he opened, so he lit a few. There, on the sooty floor, lay a small key. Silver and thin, it had markings on it the likes he'd never seen. Swirling letters, or shapes, maybe?

He took it to the box and wiped the cloth over the brass plate, polishing the brass to a shine. It said, *Vae conquisitor ex magica nigra, noninvenies hic*. Roughly translated to, "Woe seekers of black magic, you will find it here." Excitement boiled in his blood.

"Source Wizard Gasten?" he heard a voice say from outside.

"Damn!" he said quietly to himself. To the intruder, he shouted, "Coming."

He tucked the key in his pocket and heard it tinkle against the others. Quickly, he wrapped the treasure box in the silk fabric and carried it under his arm. He'd take it to his secret room and open it when he had the chance.

