

The Fount Box Set

Book 1: *The Prince's Chosen*

Book 2: *The Forsaken's Choice*

Book 3: *The Chosen Union*

Stephanie Fazio

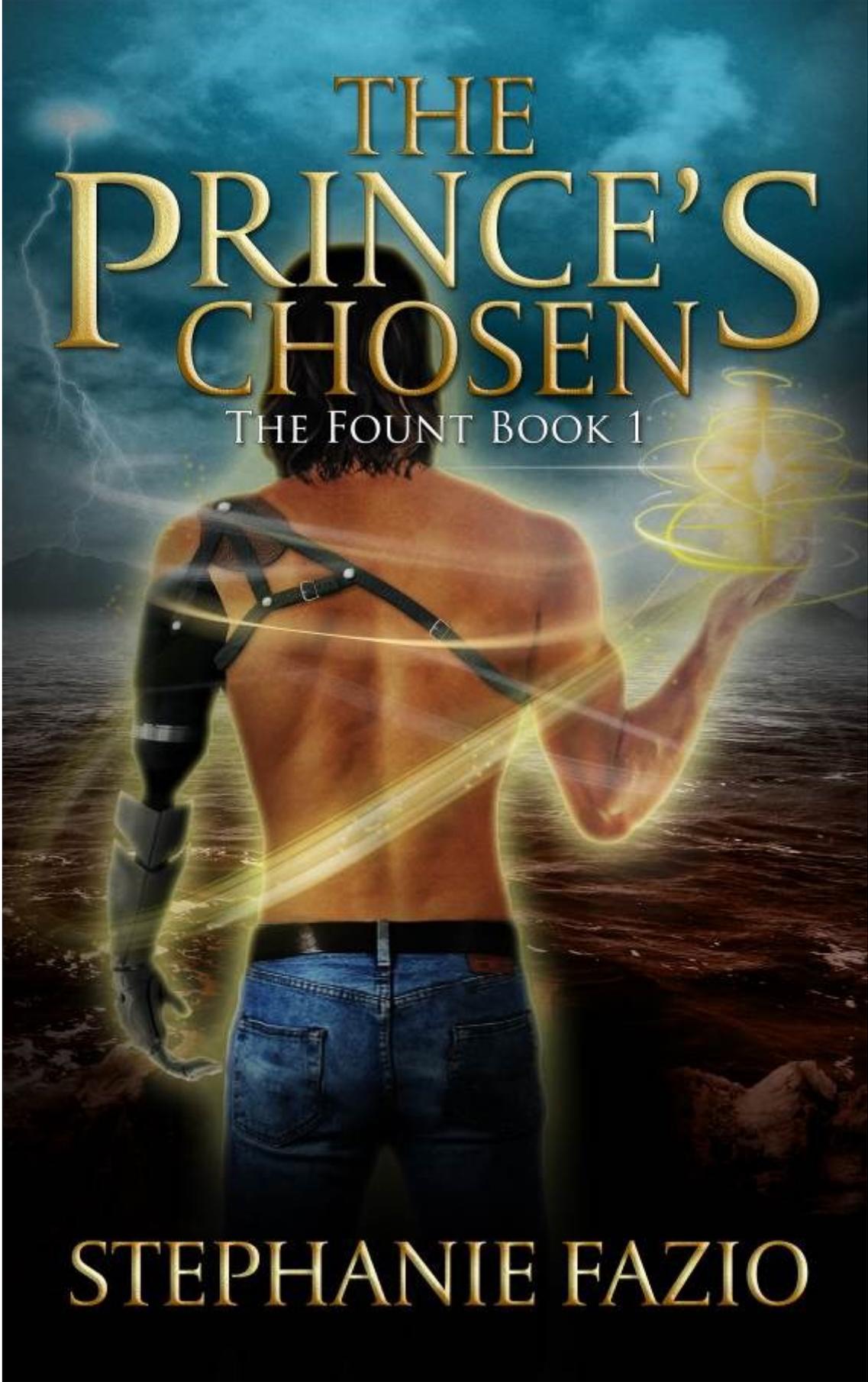
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THE PRINCE'S CHOSEN

THE FOUNT BOOK 1

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THE
**PRINCE'S
CHOSEN**
THE FOUNT BOOK 1



PROLOGUE

18 YEARS EARLIER

Their “little miracle,” as they had taken to calling her, was only a day old.

They swaddled her, folding and tucking the pink blanket around her just like the nurse had shown them. The setting Texas sun bathed their fields in fiery oranges and golds, and there seemed to be no better time to give their baby a tour of the farm.

The man and his wife stepped out onto the porch. He carried the pink bundle like she was made out of glass and might break. The rich brown of his wife’s hair stirred in the breeze as she smoothed the blankets. They sat in the wicker rocking chairs and gazed out over the cattle grazing peacefully.

“Welcome to paradise, little one,” the man said.

Looking down at his perfect baby girl, his little miracle, the man felt happiness in a way he never had before.

His wife hummed in contentment, echoing his satisfaction.

His eyes were still on the baby when he felt a change around them. The cows went still, some of their heads still lowered to the grass. The wind stopped rustling the tall weeds that he hadn’t gotten around to mowing. The air felt heavy, the way it did before a storm broke. It was as if the land around them had inhaled in preparation of a great breath. Or a scream.

And then the sky tore open.

There was no other way to describe it. There was a terrible ripping sound, like the golden-hued sky was pulled apart at its seams. It was like someone had taken a carving knife and sliced a line from the top of the sky down to the bottom. The grass shriveled and died in the place where the tear met the earth. And from the torn sky came...people....

Lots of them.

They stumbled out of nowhere and onto the front lawn. Some were moaning, others crying.

His wife grabbed his arm as she uttered a strangled shriek. “What in the—?”

“I—I don’t know,” the man replied, clutching the pink bundle tighter to his chest.

Some part of the man on the porch registered the inhuman beauty of these newcomers, with their rich copper skin and long, black hair. Even blood and flames couldn’t hide the loveliness that radiated from these people.

A boy came through the tear, limping and clutching his side. At first glance, he seemed no older than sixteen. But he seemed to age before the couple’s eyes. He grew haggard and stooped. With a groan, the boy, who was now an old man, fell to the ground. His heaving chest stilled. And then, he disappeared in a puff of blue smoke.

The man blinked. *Had that boy really just disappeared?*

He looked at his wife. His own incomprehension and fear were reflected in her too-wide eyes.

A young woman fell to the ground where the boy had been moments before. She was weeping. The man could hear her choked, agonized sobs from here. There was no one to

comfort her. Everyone else on the scorched ground was too full of their own suffering to notice hers.

The man's throat burned in sympathy for these strangers' pain. He stood, meaning to go down and help. But he couldn't make his feet move. He was just a simple cattle farmer, and this was...Armageddon?

The mayhem reached a fever pitch as a whole group of the Others fell through the tear in the sky. Even amid their obvious terror, they surrounded two people at their center, protecting them from whatever horrors they were all fleeing.

The ones being protected both wore crowns on their heads. Almost as soon as they had appeared, they ran back through the gathering crowd to the seam in the sky. They reached back through the bottom part of the tear, their arms and legs disappearing from view as though they were crossing some invisible boundary. They seemed to be pulling at something on the other side of the barrier.

The queen—for there was no doubt that was who she was—released a cry as her hand found whatever she had been searching for. She was pulling something through the tear, or at least, she was trying to. There was some force on the other side of the invisible barrier that was fighting her. The king wrapped his arms around his wife's waist and gave her a great tug.

They tumbled back onto the scorched grass. A wailing baby was now clutched in the queen's arms.

The man on the porch gripped his own baby tighter at the sight of the infant in the queen's arms, who was covered in blood. Everyone on the porch and on the ground seemed to have the same realization at the same moment. The baby's left arm was gone...torn off at the shoulder.

The queen was screaming. The king was trying to staunch the wound with clumsy hands.

"What's that?" the man's wife gasped, pointing to something wiggling around in the tall weeds on the edge of the mayhem.

The man on the porch felt his muscles unfreeze as he awoke from his stupor. He thrust his daughter into his wife's arms.

"Call 911!" he shouted to his wife.

The people who were crying and bleeding and putting out fires didn't even notice the man who had run down the porch stairs to help.

He turned back at the sound of his wife's shout. His wife was cradling their daughter in one arm and pointing up with the other. The man stopped.

The two halves of the sky were peeling away. He shaded his eyes as a ball of blue fire blazed through the tear.

It moved at impossible speed, and it was heading straight for the porch.

CHAPTER 1

ADDY

Addy climbed onto the tractor. The sun was setting behind the young green stalks of sweet corn, making their color look a little brighter and healthier than usual. The breeze stirred her long hair and surrounded her with the smell of fresh earth and unripe corn. She turned the key, feeling the familiar rumble of the tractor's engine beneath her, and pressed the throttle. She maneuvered the Benz—the name Addy had made up for the old tractor when she was a kid, thinking herself terribly clever for coming up with the ironic name—onto the path carved from years of tracing this same route around their property.

By the time Addy finished surveying all two-hundred acres of corn fields, the Benz was groaning and shuddering in protest. It sounded like the fan belt was going again. Addy made a mental note to ask Fred to take a look at it the next time she saw him.

Fred was the dairy farmer's son from next door, if you could call five miles of separation next door, and had been her best friend since she was three. He could fix anything in half the time as the mechanic whose shop was forty-five minutes away. Plus, he never charged them, claiming there was a "Deerborn discount" that applied for any of her family's repairs.

The Benz creaked into the shed, and Addy killed the engine. She hauled fresh water to their one old cow, Ginny, who was the only reminder of her parents' past life as cattle ranchers in the middle-of-nowhere Texas. Addy had been born in Texas, but she didn't remember it because her parents had moved to a corn farm in the middle-of-nowhere upstate New York soon after. Her only memories were of corn fields in the summer and snow in the winter. Their town was called Nowell, and had a population of 15,000. When she said the name, she pronounced it so it sounded like *Nowhere*, New York.

She shooed Cluckers Numbers 1-5 into their henhouse. All she got in return for saving them from the fox that had been prowling around lately was a mouthful of feathers and a shrill protest from Cluckers Number 4.

Addy washed her hands and face in the mudroom sink. She kicked off her muddy boots and shed her windbreaker. Even though it was June, it had been an unseasonably cool week. It had her dad in a tizzy over the corn.

"Everything alright with the corn?" her mom called out. She was peering into the oven, appraising the pot roast inside.

"Yes, everything's fine," Addy replied. "Not a stalk out of place."

There never was. Everything was always fine...because *nothing* ever happened. It made her want to set something on fire or blow something up, just to see people's reactions. But she didn't think her parents would accept *impending death by boredom* as a valid excuse for vandalism.

Addy's mom poked a fork into an apple pie on the counter. The smell of cinnamon wafted across the kitchen.

"Addy!"

Lucy, the youngest of Addy's four sisters, came skidding across the linoleum floor of the kitchen in her fuzzy socks. Even though Addy had only been gone for a few hours,

Lucy acted like they hadn't seen each other in weeks. Grinning down at her baby sister, Addy picked her up and spun her around in a circle.

"Wheeeee!" Lucy squealed as she waved her short legs in the air.

"Be careful with Baby Lucy," Addy's mom said as she put a casserole dish full of cheesy potatoes into the oven.

At three years of age, Lucy wasn't a baby anymore, but everyone still called her *Baby Lucy* anyway. Lucy didn't seem to mind.

Addy put her sister down. When her mom turned back to the oven, Addy reached across the counter and broke off a flaky piece of pie crust.

"Adelyne Deerborn!" her mom scolded when she saw the evidence of Addy's theft.

"Wha'?" Addy gave her mom an innocent look as the cinnamon and sugar melted on her tongue.

When her mom turned back to the oven, Aunt Meredith, who was visiting from Texas, gave Addy an *ahem*. Addy stole another piece of pie crust and tossed it to Aunt Meredith. Her aunt caught it and stuffed it in her mouth just before Addy's mom turned back around. Her mom frowned at Aunt Meredith.

"You're as bad as the girls," her mom tsked.

"I'll take that as a compliment." Aunt Meredith winked at Addy.

Aunt Meredith's face was tan and a bit leathery from so much time spent outside. Even when she wasn't on the farm, she wore her cowboy boots and cowboy hat and said ya'll.

Before she had become a cattle rancher, Aunt Meredith had been a volunteer in the Peace Corps. Addy loved hearing about all the places she'd gone and the people she'd met. Aside from being born in Texas, which didn't count since she didn't remember it, Addy had never traveled farther than a few towns over. When she laid in bed at night, she tried to imagine what it would be like to travel the world like Aunt Meredith had before she retired to the ranch.

Addy wanted to see everything, go everywhere. It was some twist of irony that she'd been born into a family whose big yearly outing was to the mall an hour-and-a-half away.

The rest of Addy's sisters came through the swinging door to the kitchen in a tornado of laughter and good-natured arguing that was the constant background noise in the farmhouse.

Stacy came in first, complaining about how Rosie had stolen her nail polish...*again*. Rosie was flatly denying it even as she kept her hands noticeably hidden behind her back. Livy, Addy's very non-identical twin, followed the other two, picking up the toys and books they left discarded on the floor. Addy grinned at her twin across the room. In spite of the mayhem, Livy sensed Addy's gaze and returned her smile.

All the sisters looked just like their mother...all of them, that was, except Addy. Addy's sisters all shared their parents' brown hair, brown eyes, and soft features. Neither of Addy's parents was tall, her father coming in at 5'6" and her mother barely hitting 5', and the rest of her sisters were similarly petite. Even Addy's twin barely made it to 5'1"...in shoes.

Addy, on the other hand, looked nothing like any of them. She alone had coppery-red hair and green eyes, which she inherited from Great-Great-Grandma Ellen. She also inherited Ellen's freakish height of 6'1". It made her stick out like a sore thumb, or a

giant, in the Deerborn crowd. It also made for the world's most ridiculous Christmas card photo.

There weren't any pictures of Great-Great-Grandma Ellen—and even if there were, they would have been in black-and-white—but Addy's mom told her that's who she could thank for the features that Livy said made her look like a model. Addy just thought she looked like the giant that Jack killed...if he had been a ginger.

Addy's dad always joked that the temper tantrums she'd thrown during her "terrible two's" had given her parents gray hair and turned Addy's red. That was also around the time her parents started calling her Firecracker Addy. All these years later, the nickname stuck. It was a nickname Addy much preferred over her twin's equally-deserved one of Sweet Livy.

"Mo-om!" Stacy called from across the kitchen. She was chasing Rosie back through the swinging door into the living room. Addy caught the door before it hit Baby Lucy in the face and eased it shut.

"Never a dull moment around here." Addy's mom smiled as she wiped her hands on her jeans and moved over to the colander of green beans.

Addy's middle sisters came back into the kitchen. Stacy held the bottle of nail polish victoriously over her head while Rosie jumped up and down, trying to steal it back.

"Jeez, Mom," Stacy said eyeing their mother's grease-stained jeans. "Can we buy you some new pants the next time we go to the mall? Puh-lease?"

"But these ones are fine," their mom replied. She patted her leg. "Plenty of life left."

"Debatable," Stacy muttered.

Their mom wore what Stacy complained were "Mom jeans" and the same plain, cotton shirt that came in six different solid colors at Wal Mart (their mom never tired of bragging that they were buy one, get one 50% off). One of their mom's favorite sayings was *never buy something without a discount*. The other was *family, corn, and God, in that order*.

"Set the table, girls," Addy's mom said. "We're having an early dinner because I need to take Aunt Meredith back to the airport, and I don't want her to miss the celebration."

"Celebration?" Addy asked, taking the ear of corn her aunt handed her and shucking it over the compost bin.

"Do you think I'd come all the way up to the Arctic for anything less than a celebration?" Aunt Meredith asked.

"We don't live in the Arctic," Rosie informed their aunt.

At ten years of age, Rosie was always trying to keep up with her older sisters.

"You don't?" Aunt Meredith glanced around, feigning confusion. "Then why is it so cold here?"

"It's because you're from Texas and we live in New York," Rosie replied with confidence.

"She was joking, stupid," Stacy, three years older than Rosie, informed her younger sister. Stacy and Rosie bickered worse than the Cluckers.

Lucy looked at Stacy and started to cry.

"Girls, stop fighting," their mom said. "You're upsetting Baby Lucy."

"She isn't a baby anymore," Rosie informed their mom.

Their mom just smiled.

Livy opened her arms to Lucy, while Addy snatched the stuffed animal Lucy had dropped onto the floor and offered it to the baby.

“Seriously, Mom.” Stacy threw up her hands. “Can’t you wash Chicken Little? That thing is smelling worse than usual.”

They all looked at the stuffed animal Lucy was clutching and using to wipe her tears. Rosie had named the stuffed animal Chicken Little when Aunt Meredith first gave it to Lucy. Even though the toy was a duck and not a chicken, the name prevailed.

There was the sound of boots being scraped against the side of the house, and then the back door slammed.

“Livy-Addy-Stacy-Rosie-Lucy!” their dad called from the mudroom. “Where’s my fabulous five?”

“Daddy’s home!” Stacy and Rosie shrieked. They raced for the back door, pushing and arguing as they went.

Addy’s father came into the kitchen, a daughter clinging to each of his legs. He smiled, the corners of his eyes folding in the oft-practiced gesture. He rolled up the sleeves of his faded shirt—his uniform was flannel, jeans, and work boots, no matter the season—and combed his unruly tuft of graying brown hair with his fingers.

“Hello, darling.” Addy’s mom stepped around Rosie, who was still clinging to their father’s pantleg, and gave her husband a kiss on the cheek.

Addy looked at her family swarming around the kitchen. She loved them all so much it physically hurt. Everything was so warm and familiar.

And yet, even as she was surrounded by all of them, she couldn’t help the disembodied sense that she didn’t quite belong with the rest of them. It was a feeling she got from time to time, and it had nothing to do with her red hair, green eyes, and height. It was a sense that she was an outsider staring in on someone else’s family.

* * *

Addy thought it was a miracle when they all managed to sit down at the table. Stacy and Rosie were still arguing, Baby Lucy was clutching Chicken Little, and their mom and Aunt Meredith were doling out food. When Rosie accidentally-on-purpose flicked a crumb across the table in the general direction of Addy, Addy was immediately prepared to return fire with a salt potato poised on the edge of her fork.

Livy gave Addy a meaningful glance, knowing what she meant to do before she did it, and gave Rosie a tolerant smile. Addy gave her twin a *What? I wasn’t going to do anything* look.

Addy had read that twins shared their own special language, and she and Livy were no exception. But as much as they could communicate without talking and knew each other inside and out, they were as different as two people could be. Aside from the more obvious physical differences between them, their personalities were complete opposites, too. There was a reason their parents called them Firecracker Addy and Sweet Livy. Addy was always the one causing some kind of mayhem, and Livy was the one who covered for her.

While Livy cut up Baby Lucy’s meat into tiny pieces, Addy contented herself with making funny faces that made their youngest sister giggle and squeal.

Their dad cleared his throat. “Before we eat, we have a surprise for Livy and Addy.”

Addy exchanged a look with her twin. Livy ducked lower in her chair; she hated being the center of attention. Addy, on the other hand, had no problem with being the

center of attention. The only issue was that, in a house of seven, she was usually getting it for forgetting to shut the chicken coop or bribing one of her younger sisters to do her chores so she could spend her afternoons tinkering with cars in Fred's garage.

"Is it a Porsche?" Addy asked.

Addy loved cars. Big ones, old ones, fast ones. Especially fast ones. If she ever became a criminal, she'd want to be the getaway driver.

Aunt Meredith snorted. "That should have been your sixteenth birthday present, not your eighteenth."

"Good point," Addy said. She turned to her dad. "You owe me a Porsche and a Lamborghini."

Gary Deerborn frowned. "You know any car without all-wheel drive wouldn't make it out of the garage after the first snowfall."

"Gary, dear," her mom said, "Addy's just pulling your leg."

He paused, one finger still raised in the air while he considered that, and then slowly lowered it.

Livy narrowed her eyes at her twin. Addy shrugged, feeling a bit chastened.

"Now, Livy and Addy," their mom said, "close your eyes."

They did.

There was rustling and whispering, and then came the command to open their eyes.

There were balloons tied to Addy and Livy's chairs and a giant sheet cake with *Happy 18th Birthday and Congratulations on Cornell!* written in green icing. Addy looked up from the cake and saw that her sisters were wearing identical shirts. The shirts were green with white lettering that read "Ithaca is Gorges." Even Baby Lucy had one. Her parents and Aunt Meredith were wearing red T-shirts with Cornell University in huge white lettering stretched across the front.

"We're so proud of you both," their mom said, wiping away a tear.

"Our little miracles." Their dad beamed at them.

It was what their parents had called Livy and Addy since they were born. The doctor had told their parents they might not be able to conceive, but then, a year later, the twins were born. Stacy, Rosie, and Baby Lucy had followed.

Their mom handed Livy and Addy their own Cornell T-shirts. Livy immediately pulled hers on over the shirt she was wearing. Addy left hers on the table, forcing a smile on her face as she echoed Livy's thank you's.

"Open your presents," Stacy demanded.

There were two wrapped gifts propped against the kitchen table. Addy picked hers up. It was heavy.

Livy was carefully unsticking the tape from each corner of the package to keep from ripping the paper. Addy tore hers off in half a second. It was her acceptance letter to Cornell, framed. Her eyes skimmed over the words she'd already read.

Dear Adelyne Deerborn,

It is with great pleasure that I write to inform you that you have been accepted for admission to the Cornell University College of Agriculture and Life Sciences....

"Ohmygosh!" Livy exclaimed when she finally unwrapped her gift.

It was the same frame, same politely enthusiastic wording in the acceptance letter, same photocopied signature of the Dean of Admissions. The only difference was that her letter was addressed to “Olivia Deerbourn.”

“Thank you!” Livy brushed away a tear before rising to hug their parents.

“Yes, thank you,” Addy said, going to do the same.

Cornell had always been Livy and their parents’ dream. It wasn’t Addy’s.

Livy was the one who fell asleep with open textbooks on her lap. She was the one who spent the little money she had on hardcover copies of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Jane Eyre*. Addy, on the other hand, had always done well on the exams their mother gave them without putting much effort into studying. Her assignments came easily to her, but she got no enjoyment out of her success. She did well in her studies because she had no reason not to, but she didn’t share any of her twin’s passion.

Addy felt a little numb except for the tightness in her chest. She rubbed at the place above her collarbone, trying to release the tension that restricted her breathing every time she thought about the future...the future that didn’t hold even a glimmer of uncertainty. But she kept her smile in place. She could never tell any of them, not even Livy. They wouldn’t understand the way she sometimes felt trapped, like she needed to just get the hell out or she’d go completely crazy....

“And the best part is Cornell’s only an hour away,” her dad was saying, “so we’ll be able to visit whenever you want.”

Her sisters all cheered. Addy tried to breath.

She could never admit to any of them that she felt like something was missing. How could she explain that she felt like she was part of this family, but also separate from them? She could never tell them that she often felt alone even when she was surrounded by all of them.

Addy knew she was being horrible and ungrateful. Her family was wonderful, and they loved her. She loved them back, more than anything in the entire world.

She didn’t understand herself sometimes. She should be happy. And yet, she couldn’t help wondering if this was all there was. She knew it was wrong, but she couldn’t stop herself from wishing for more, even if she had no idea what *more* might entail.

Addy pulled on the Cornell University shirt and forced a smile onto her face.

* * *

They dug into the food, and for a few moments, the only sounds were the scraping of forks and knives on plates.

“Mmm.” Addy’s dad stamped his foot on the ground in satisfaction as he chewed.

“Sue, this has got to be the best meal I’ve had in my entire life.”

Addy’s mom smiled at her dad. He said those same words every night.

He opened his mouth to speak, and as he did so, Addy mimed his every word along with him.

“Fresh meat from the Jones’, sweet corn from our own fields, and apple pie made with apples from the Davis’.”

Addy even mimicked the hand gestures her father used. She did it all for the benefit of her younger sisters, who snickered into their glasses of milk (fresh from the Browns' farm, of course). Even Livy was trying not to laugh. Her parents didn't notice.

"This, my girls," their dad continued, "is the real American Dream."

Addy finished with a flourish of her hand that matched her father's exactly.

Aunt Meredith, who had been watching Addy, snorted.

"Bravo," she said.

Addy's father beamed.

"How are your cattle doing, Aunt Meredith?" Livy asked as she cut a single green bean into three even pieces.

Aunt Meredith swallowed her mouthful of corn and shook her head. "Strange things have been happening lately." She shoved in another bite. "Last week, there was an earthquake. It was strong enough to wake me." Aunt Meredith turned to her sister. "Remember that glass vase Grandma Mildred left me? It fell out of the cabinet and shattered."

"I never liked that vase," Sue mused.

"Yeah, but the darndest part was that when I mentioned it in town, no one else had felt it. There wasn't a word about it in the news, either." She shook her head. "It seemed like it was only on my property."

Addy saw her parents exchange a worried look, but Aunt Meredith didn't notice. Her aunt laughed and then elbowed Stacy, who was sitting next to her. "You think that's why your parents gave me the house?"

"Shh, Meredith," their mom said.

For some reason Addy couldn't understand, her mom's face was pinched with anxiety. Her parents got weird sometimes for no real reason. They were worriers, which was why they homeschooled all of their daughters and never let Addy go visit Aunt Meredith, or go anywhere else for that matter. Addy had learned that when her parents got in one of their worrying states, the only thing to do was wait until the wind shifted and their moods blew over.

"Alright," their dad said in a too-bright voice. "Let's clean up."

Addy saw her aunt raise her eyebrows. Addy's mom shook her head. Whatever question Aunt Meredith had asked and her mother had answered, her aunt didn't like the response. Aunt Meredith's mouth thinned in the way it did whenever anyone said they were voting for a Democrat.

"Sue," Aunt Meredith began.

Addy's dad, who almost never raised his voice, said, "Leave it, Meredith," in a way that brooked no argument.

Aunt Meredith glared at him for a moment, but then she shook her head. Whatever they were talking about, she let it drop. It was probably something about farm boundaries or head of cattle. Addy's parents didn't have interesting secrets.

There was a loud thump that made them all turn their heads. Livy had fallen onto the floor, her head cracking against the linoleum.

"Quickly," their mom said, but there was no need for it.

Addy was already by Livy's side. She eased her twin's head off the floor, while Aunt Meredith pushed a folded jacket under her neck to keep Livy from hitting her head again. Stacy was two seconds behind with an ice pack for Livy's forehead. Addy took her

sister's hand and watched as Livy's eyelids fluttered and incoherent sounds came from her parted lips.

"It's okay," they all said, as soon as Livy stopped jerking and opened her eyes. "You're okay."

Livy looked confused for a moment. She was always disoriented after. Sometimes she was scared, and it took a while to calm her down. The seizures used to come only once or twice a month, but lately, they were coming more like once or twice a week. Livy had been through every test the doctors had, but none of them could find any reason for the seizures she'd had ever since Addy could remember.

"How long was I out for?" Livy asked when she found her voice.

"A few seconds," their dad told her.

"Did I say anything crazy?" Livy asked Addy. She never remembered what had happened during the seizure when she woke up.

"Just had some crazy eyes," Addy told her, smoothing her sweaty hair off her forehead and squeezing her clammy hand.

"You feeling alright?" their mom asked.

"Fine." Livy reached up to rub the back of her head and winced. "I just wish I didn't always have to go head-first."

"You could wear my bike helmet," Rosie offered.

"Absolutely not." Stacy clutched her heart. "That would give her helmet hair."

Livy gave them an apologetic smile as Addy helped her to her feet.

"Come on girls," their mom said, giving Livy one more appraising stare before going back to the dishes. "I have to take Aunt Meredith back to the airport, and Rosie and Stacy, you have assignments to do."

Both of them groaned.

"Why can't we go to regular school with regular teachers?" Stacy grumbled.

"Because I can teach you better than any teacher," their mom replied. "And this way, you can be with your sisters and help out around the farm." It was her standard response any time any of them (usually Addy) complained about being homeschooled.

"Even in regular school, you'd still have homework," Livy pointed out.

Of all of them, Livy was the only one who actually liked being homeschooled by their mom. Addy was on Stacy's side and would have preferred a school with actual teachers and students besides her sisters, but any time she'd mentioned it, her mom gave Addy the *we're not having this conversation* look. And then she'd assigned Addy more work.

"When I get into college, will you at least buy me a cell phone?" Stacy asked their mom.

"No," their parents said at the same time.

Stacy rolled her eyes. It was one of their parents' cardinal rules: no cell phones. They said it took away from the atmosphere of living on a farm. It annoyed Stacy to no end, but Addy didn't really care. Aside from Fred and Aunt Meredith, she didn't talk to anyone outside her own house. Addy wouldn't know what to do with a cell phone even if she had one. Stacy, though, wanted to upload her makeup tutorials on YouTube and was always complaining about not being able to update her Instagram.

"How come Addy and Livy don't have assignments?" Rosie asked, hefting an earth science textbook away from Baby Lucy, who had been nibbling on its corner.

"Because we're graduates," Livy said, smiling at Addy. "We're college-bound."

“That’s right,” Addy said, sharing none of her twin’s enthusiasm. “Cornell College of Agriculture, here we come.”

CHAPTER 2

TOL

Tol leaned over the stone wall and looked at the water without really seeing it. He couldn't tell if the rising mist was coming from the English Channel, or if his vision had gone so bleary it was playing tricks on him.

His left shoulder hurt. It always hurt more when he was exhausted. He massaged the place where his living flesh met the prosthesis. The carbon-fiber arm, the most expensive one money could buy, chafed. The straps holding it in place dug into his chest.

A cold breeze was coming in. The air smelled like rain, but the air in England always smelled like rain. He should go back into the manor where there was a fire burning in the study, but he was too tired to move.

"No luck, I take it?"

Tol knew the sound of his best mate's voice without having to turn around. When Tol did turn to face him, Gerth was striding up the gravel path in a baggy suit and badly-knotted tie.

"No luck, no leads, no sign of her," Tol replied.

Gerth and Tol shared the same bronze skin, black hair, and dark eyes characteristic of their people. All of the Chosen kept their hair long, with the men wearing theirs down to their shoulders and the women letting theirs grow down to their waists. Tol kept his just long enough that he could pull it back, but Gerth's hair was long enough to braid. While Tol was just shy of two meters tall, uncharacteristically large among the Chosen, Gerth was half a meter shorter. When they stood near each other, Gerth had to tip his head back to look Tol in the eye.

"I'm not crazy," Tol said. "I felt her."

He just couldn't find her.

It was infuriating. He'd sense this crackle of energy and know it was her. He'd feel her in his mind. But when he searched for her, when he tried to find her, all he saw was blackness. As quickly as the feeling came, it disappeared again. Sometimes it was too fast for him to even process what had happened until the moment had already passed, and he was left with nothing but the sick feeling that he would be too late.

His most recent trip was to France, where he'd stayed for five days chasing down a lead on the Fount. Tol hadn't found her. He had nothing to show for the wasted time and Source except for a bad mood and aching shoulder.

He'd been feeling the Fount more often since his eighteenth birthday, but maybe that was just his subconscious panicking about how little time he had left to find her. If only he could keep the connection inside him alive long enough to see more than just that empty black.

"We'll find her, Tol," Gerth said, giving him a sympathetic look. "Gods know—"

"The gods don't know anything," Tol said with a venom he hadn't known he felt. "They're dead."

"They're not dead, they've just abandoned us." Gerth leaned over the wall beside him. "After eighteen years, you've gotta wonder if it's all—"

“Useless?” Tol supplied. “A waste of time?”

Gerth gave him a wry smile. “I’d hardly call the survival of our entire race a waste of time.”

Shame heated Tol’s face. Gerth’s parents had died in the Crossing.

“I’m sorry,” he mumbled.

“No worries, mate.” Gerth elbowed him. “Sometimes I think the Celestial is playing the greatest hoax in two worlds on us and just made up that rubbish about the Fount.”

“Some hoax that’d be.” Tol dug the fingers of his real hand into the stone wall, feeling the grit bury into his skin.

“People are getting restless.” Gerth played with the necklace he wore. The glass vial hanging on the metal chain looked almost the same as Tol’s, except it was smaller.

Tol winced. “I know. My parents think there’s going to be a coup if we don’t find the Fount soon.”

“We’ll find her,” Gerth said, his confident words belied by the way he twisted and untwisted his necklace.

“The scholars think I should have been able to sense her by now.” Tol clenched his fist.

“Don’t be so hard on yourself,” Gerth said. “Carrying the weight of a whole world on your shoulders isn’t something I’d wish on my worst enemy. You’re doing everything you can.”

Tol wasn’t listening. He was staring at the glass vial on Gerth’s necklace. There was less liquid in it than there had been the last time they were together. It was barely half-full.

“What in the two hells,” Tol said.

Gerth followed the line of his gaze and waved a dismissive hand. “Some trouble with the Forsaken. It’s not a big deal.”

“Not a big deal?” Tol’s voice was rising, but he was too angry to keep it down. Tol was grabbing for the necklace around his own throat, intending to pour some of the precious liquid Source from his vial into Gerth’s, but his prosthetic arm was clumsy and the glass vial’s stopper was very small. One would think that after eighteen years without his left arm, he’d be used to having a prosthesis.

One would be wrong.

“Tol, stop it,” Gerth said. “You need to save your Source.”

His calm only made Tol angrier.

“You don’t get to sacrifice yourself,” Tol said, still wrestling with the stopper of his vial. “Not for anyone, and especially not for me.”

The Source gave them access to their abilities, among other things. They were defenseless without it.

Gerth put a hand over Tol’s, prying it away from his necklace. “I won’t be a sacrifice, okay? We’re going to find her.”

Tol turned away, unable to look his friend in the eye.

“Tol. We’re going to find the Fount. The blood marriage will be done, and we’ll all be saved.”

“And then we’ll return to Vitaquias and live happily ever after?” Tol asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Precisely.”

Tol cracked a grin, his first in days. Just as quickly, though, reality came back. He lowered his head. "We only have ten more months, maybe less if she's older than me."

"An older woman," Gerth said, giving Tol a slow nod. "The Celestial must have known you'd need someone more mature."

Tol snorted.

They both turned at the sound of footsteps crunching up the gravel path.

"Prince Tolumus." The title came out as a sneer, making it sound like an insult. Everything that came out of his cousin's mouth sounded like an insult.

"Erikir," Tol said. He forced himself to stand up straight so he towered over his older cousin.

Unlike Gerth's too-big suit, Erikir was wearing trousers and a crisp button-down shirt that were tailored to his narrow frame. His hair was in a tight braid that not even the stubborn English wind could coax out of place. His skin was lighter than Tol's, giving him a sallow appearance. Or maybe it was just the perpetual grimace Erikir wore that made him look pinched and unwell. Not that any of their people were the pinnacle of health....

"The king is sending more Chosen with you on the next search," Erikir informed Tol. "They're not happy with the progress that's been made, or should I say, the *lack of progress*."

"Of course, they're not happy," Gerth snapped. "No one needs reminding that our entire race is on the brink of destruction."

"We lost another three in Moscow," Erikir said, ignoring Gerth.

Tol sucked in a breath. "Three?"

Erikir nodded. "The Forsaken are getting bolder, and without more Source, we have less ability to defend ourselves." His cousin gave another pointed look at Tol's full necklace.

Tol's face burned. He knew what his cousin was implying. If Erikir, rather than Tol, had been the king's son, then maybe their people wouldn't be on the brink of despair. Tol knew there was nothing more he could do, but it didn't keep the shame of his failures from making him want to disappear into the darkest hole he could find.

"The king's leading a party tomorrow to kill those Forsaken," Erikir continued. "We can't have another Jariath."

Tol suppressed a shudder. Jariath had gone missing a few months ago after tracking some Forsaken in South America. His body had been found weeks later in Rio de Janeiro. The Forsaken just left his corpse for the mortals to find, and his people had found out what happened on the evening news, of all places.

Jariath's body had been mutilated. Those barbarians had cut off every one of his fingers, and done worse, before finally killing him.

Tol's people were left wondering what Jariath had told their enemy before he died. There was no proof, of course, but Tol felt certain the Forsaken now knew the secret his people had been guarding for eighteen years. The Forsaken were master interrogators, and Tol didn't think there was any way they had let Jariath die before telling them about the Fount, the power of her blood, and Tol's role in all of it.

Now, it wasn't just about finding the Fount and convincing her to blood marry him. It was also about finding her before the Forsaken.

Tol's pulse faltered at the possibility of finally discovering where the Fount was, only to find her already in the barbarians' grasp.

Did they know her blood opened the portal? Would they be able to use it without Tol? He didn't know, and he hoped to the gods he wouldn't have to find out.

"Who else is going to Moscow?" Gerth asked Erikir, pulling Tol away from his dark thoughts.

Erikir rolled his eyes like he could hardly be bothered to answer, but when Tol glared at him, Erikir said, "The king and queen, the royal guard," he gave Gerth a sour look, "and you, I suppose."

"The whole guard?" Tol asked.

"Your parents aren't taking any chances this time," Erikir replied. "We can't lose anyone else, and our Source is running out."

He didn't need to say what came next. When the Source ran out, any of their people who were beyond the span of mortal years would die, and the rest of them would be completely vulnerable to the Forsaken.

"What about the Fount?" Tol asked. "We can't take all of us off the search."

"She won't do us any good if the Forsaken kill us all before we find her," Erikir sneered. "As prince of the Chosen, I'd expect you to know that."

"As the prince's underling, I'd expect you to watch your mouth," Gerth shot back.

Erikir glared at Tol. "I really hope she's got a hairy mole right here," he tapped his chin, smirking at Tol's involuntary shudder. "Or maybe, she'll have three arms, and then together, you'll make up a whole person."

Gerth already had the cork of his glass vial off.

"Put it away, Gerth," Tol commanded. "He's not worth a drop."

Besides, it wasn't like Gerth could even use the Source against one of their own. It was more instinct bred from habit after a lifetime of turning to Source as their only weapon.

Gerth scowled, but at the look Tol gave him, he stoppered the vial. It had always been like this with them. The nature of Tol's position didn't give him the luxury of losing his temper, or using Source for anything that wasn't killing Forsaken or finding the Fount. So Gerth had insisted on doing his fighting for him. Even when they were kids in mortal school, Gerth was the first one to throw a punch whenever someone made fun of Tol's missing arm.

Erikir wasn't finished, though. "I wonder." He cocked his head, like he was considering. "Do you think the blood marriage hurts as much as they say? I've heard it feels like your insides are being ripped apart."

Tol had to physically restrain Gerth from attacking Erikir.

"Clear out of here," Tol told Erikir, still holding out a hand to Gerth, warning him to stay put.

When Erikir didn't move, Tol took another step toward him. "As your prince, I command you to *clear out*."

"You know," Erikir said, "if I didn't know any better, I'd think you were trying *not* to find her."

Before Tol could reply, Erikir turned, and with an audible huff, stomped back toward the manor. When he was gone, Tol slumped against the wall.

"I really hate that prat," Gerth muttered.

"He's not wrong," Tol said, pressing a palm into his eyes. "Part of me doesn't want to find her."

"Suicidal, much?" Gerth asked.

“No.” Tol pounded his fist against the stone wall. “I just don’t want to be tied to a girl with a hairy mole for the rest of eternity.”

Tol really didn’t care if she had a hairy mole or not. It was *the rest of eternity* part that was the real nightmare. That tight feeling he got whenever he thought about it threatened to crush his ribs. *Don’t think about it*, he ordered himself. *Find her. Complete the blood marriage. Save your people.*

Gerth raised an eyebrow at him.

Tol raked a hand through his hair and sighed. “I’m whining, aren’t I?”

“Like a little girl,” Gerth confirmed.

After a pause, Gerth continued, “Look, no one wants to have the weight of their race’s survival on their shoulders. But if I have to put my life in someone else’s hands, I suppose I’m okay with it being you.”

“You gush,” Tol said with a roll of his eyes.

“In all seriousness, you’re a damn fine prince, and you’ll be a better king.”

Tol felt those words like twin sacks of flour being lowered onto his shoulders. “...if I can find the Fount.”

“When the time is right, you will feel the Fount’s presence and know where to find her.” Gerth used an ominous, flat voice to repeat the Celestial’s words from eighteen years ago.

Neither one of them had been old enough to have heard her words firsthand or remember the destruction of their world. But the Celestial’s pronouncement, and her actions that followed, had consumed both of their lives since they were old enough to understand them.

“Look,” Gerth said, “why don’t you stay at the manor for a couple of days?”

“Yeah, right.” Tol rolled his eyes. “I’m going to let you all fight the Forsaken while I just kick back and relax.”

“I’m serious,” Gerth persisted. “You can’t come with us and put yourself in that kind of danger, and there haven’t been any new leads on the Fount.”

It was true he couldn’t go to Moscow. If the Forsaken killed him—and they would certainly try—it would mean the death of the rest of his people, too. But that didn’t mean he had to sit idle while his family and people went off to battle their centuries-long foes.

“And you want me to what, laze around the manor? Get breakfast in bed? Play chess on the balcony?”

“You suck at chess,” Gerth pointed out.

“No, you’re just freakishly good,” Tol replied.

“I am good, aren’t I?” Gerth widened his eyes, like he was just now discovering he was the best strategist among a people who were known for their ability to strategize.

Tol scowled.

Gerth’s expression turned serious. “How long has it been since you’ve been home for longer than it takes to repack your bag?”

Tol thought about that. He couldn’t remember.

“Exactly,” Gerth said, reading his expression. “If you keep running yourself ragged, you’ll be in no position to woo the Fount when we do find her.”

Tol grimaced. For his own sanity, he tried not think about what would happen after he found her.

“Even your Haze is weak,” Gerth persisted. “You’re looking as dull as Erikir.”

“Ouch.” Tol gave his friend a wounded look.

Gerth was referring to the slight gold shimmer that surrounded all of their people. It was a visual reminder of how much of the gods' blessing was inside them. The stronger the Haze, the more powerful the immortal. Of all of them, even the king and queen, Tol's Haze was brightest. Fortunately, Haze wasn't visible to mortals.

"Maybe you're right," Tol conceded.

"Good lad." Gerth thumped him on the back. "Take the next few days for yourself. Read a book or something. When we get back from Moscow, you can go back on the road."

"Read a book?" Tol raised an eyebrow.

"Do whatever you want. Just stay away from Nira." Gerth gave him a pointed stare. "She's falling a bit too hard for you. Besides, she's lost enough already. No need to add a broken heart to the list."

Gerth's tone was teasing, but there was truth behind his words. Nira had lost everyone in her family during the Crossing except for her aunts, and they were faring badly in the mortal world.

"Nira knows the deal," Tol replied, trying to quiet the voice of guilt in his head. "She knows it can't ever be more."

"She may know it, but that doesn't mean she's okay with it," Gerth replied. "Don't tell me you haven't noticed the way she looks at you."

Tol winced. He *had* started noticing; he just hadn't known what to do about it. The few hours he stole with Nira were an escape and an excuse.... An escape from the inevitable shackles that would be his future. An excuse not to be alone in his bed with only his thoughts of said future.

"Okay, I'll stay away from Nira, *Mum*."

"Good lad." Gerth pinched Tol's cheek, and Tol swatted at him.

Gerth gave him a light punch in his prosthetic arm. There was thunk as Gerth's living flesh hit the carbon-fiber.

"Ow." Gerth clutched his fist.

"Idiot." Tol grinned.

CHAPTER 3

ADDY

Addy bolted awake. There was a light sheen of sweat on her brow, and the hairs on the back of her neck were prickling.

“You okay?” Livy’s sleepy whisper came from across the room.

“Fine,” Addy whispered back. “Go back to bed.”

“You have that dream again?”

That dream.

“No.”

And she hadn’t...at least, not tonight. Something else had woken her.

Livy fell back asleep almost immediately, but Addy’s pulse was still racing. She sat up in bed and listened. When she heard nothing except for Livy’s steady breathing, she tip-toed to the door and cracked it open. She heard the sound of the TV floating up from downstairs, but that wasn’t unusual. Her parents often fell asleep on the couch before shutting it off.

She rubbed her forehead. Maybe she’d been having some other dream she couldn’t remember, and that was the reason she’d woken up.

A window shattered downstairs. Her mom screamed.

Addy was already moving toward the stairs as Livy scrambled out of bed.

Stacy and Rosie’s door cracked open, and their heads poked out. “What’s going on?” Stacy asked, her eyes as round as saucers.

“Get Lucy and lock yourselves in your bedroom,” Addy told them as she headed for the stairs on silent feet.

“Wait,” Livy said, yanking on her bathrobe. “Should we—”

“You stay up here with the others,” Addy whispered. She gave her twin’s hand a squeeze.

Livy’s face was white as a sheet, but she shook her head. “I’m coming with you.”

Addy crept down the rest of the stairs, avoiding the ones that creaked. She kept to the shadows along the wall as she inched toward the living room, motioning for Livy to stay behind her.

“Where’s the money?” an unfamiliar male voice demanded.

At the sound of her father’s voice and her mother’s crying, Addy abandoned all pretenses at stealth. She ran for them.

“Kitchen,” her dad was saying. “Cookie jar in the shape of a c-cat.”

“Don’t move,” the thief replied. “Unless you want to see your wife’s blood all over the floor.”

Addy burst into the living room with Livy on her heels. Her father was trying to inch toward the mantle where he kept his unloaded rifle. Her mother was sitting on the couch, her shoulders shaking from her sobs. The thief was in the kitchen. Livy went straight for their mother. The two of them wrapped their arms around each other, like they were each trying to protect the other.

Addy stood in the center of the room, not knowing what she should do.

“P-please,” their mom begged. “Just take the money and leave.”

There was the sound of shattering pottery. They all jumped.

The thief threw open the swinging door between the two rooms and stalked back to them. He was a few inches shorter than Addy. He wore overalls and boots, but that described most of the men in their town. He looked like he was in his twenties or thirties, but the beard made it hard to tell.

Addy took in the thief’s appearance in an instant. It was the knife in his right hand—not the drawstring bag that held her family’s savings clutched in his left—that drew her attention. The blade was long and sharp. It was the kind of blade someone carried around when they meant business.

“Where’s the rest?” the thief demanded, holding up the cloth bag.

“That’s all there is,” her dad replied.

“Liar!”

The thief took hold of the collar of her mom’s bathrobe and hauled her to her feet. Livy screamed and reached for her. At the same moment, the box of bullets her father had been trying to free from behind Great Aunt Mary’s urn fell to the ground. The bullets spilled out, dropping like hail on the wood floor.

“Big mistake, buddy,” the thief growled.

Livy screamed again as she reached a hand out to their father. Before she could rise to her feet, Livy slumped onto the couch. Her whole body convulsed in a seizure. It was a bad one...Addy could tell. But she kept her focus on the thief, who had stopped in the middle of the room. He was looking from Addy’s father to Livy. Addy couldn’t tell what he was planning to do when he raised the knife in his hand.

The ground beneath Addy’s feet trembled. She lurched, losing her footing, and then stared around at the others.

“Was that an earthquake?” Addy gasped.

Everyone looked at her. Her mom gave her a slight, nervous shake of her head.

“Are all of you crazy?” the thief demanded.

Had Addy really been the only one to feel that? How could that even be possible?

She hadn’t imagined the floor shaking, had she?

When she looked up, Addy saw a faint golden light. It seemed to come from nowhere, and it was getting brighter.

Again, she looked around at the others, waiting for the same confusion and shock she felt to come over their features. It didn’t happen. Her mom was still looking at Livy, while her dad and the thief were staring at each other. No one else had noticed the golden light.

In fact, everyone else was frozen in the same spot they had been in right after the room started to shake. It was like someone had stopped time but had forgotten to include Addy. Aside from Livy, whose body was still wracked by tremors, no one else was moving.

The room erupted in golden light. Addy looked down. She gasped when she saw that she was glowing...*she* was the source of the golden light.

And then, before Addy could even try to process what was going on, time unfroze.

Addy forgot about the shaking ground and golden light as the thief looked from Livy, who was still shuddering and mumbling incoherently, to the bullets on the ground. Addy took advantage of his momentary indecision. She threw herself at the thief.

The man went flying. His hands were tangled in her shirt, and he dragged her with him as he hit the swinging door that separated the living room from the kitchen. Addy and the thief stumbled into the dark kitchen. Golden light flared around her. It was like a lightbulb had been turned on *inside* her body, and now her skin was radiating light.

Before she had a chance to consider it further, the thief slashed at her with his knife. When he missed, he threw a wild punch, which she ducked. Addy had never been in a fight in her life. She hadn't even done karate as a little kid. And yet, her body seemed to know what to do before her mind registered what was happening. The thief swung his knife again. Again, she dodged it.

Addy wasn't scared. She was angry. Her anger at the thief grew until it was a roaring, pulsing thing inside her. She gave herself up to whatever instinct was driving her movements.

When the thief slashed at her again, Addy grabbed his wrist in one of her hands. They struggled for only a moment before she pushed him off balance. He stumbled back into the table.

She used her height advantage and backhanded the man's face so hard his spine cracked against one of the heavy wooden chairs. The knife went skittering across the floor and disappeared beneath the refrigerator.

Wow. She had no idea where all this power...all this rage...was coming from. It was exhilarating. It was freeing. It was like nothing she'd experienced in her eighteen years of life. The golden light inside her blazed, like it knew what she had just done and approved.

The thief writhed as he tried to regain his breath. Addy kned him in the groin, and he collapsed on the floor. There was a pair of her mother's small gardening shears on the counter beside her. She grasped the shears and kneeled over the thief.

"Please," the thief gasped as Addy loomed over him. "I'll never come back."

There was real fear in his eyes. The bag of money had fallen out of his grip, and he made no move to reach for it. Addy felt the broken porcelain of the cookie jar cut into her knees.

The golden light surrounding Addy blazed brighter. Rage, so blinding the man's face flickered in and out of focus, took hold of Addy. She didn't fight it. She welcomed it.

"Please let me go," the thief begged.

Addy lifted the garden shears over her head. "I don't think so."

She let out a scream as she drove the shears into his chest.

* * *

TOL

Tol awoke with a scream on his lips. His hair was damp with sweat.

"Where are you?" he yelled.

His vision went blurry, and then dark. For a few moments, all Tol saw was the blackness of *her* fear, but then, the image before him changed. He sat up with a gasp.

He knew where she was.

He ran through the halls of the manor, ignoring the servants' wide-eyed stares at the sight of him wearing only an unbuttoned shirt to hide his missing arm and his boxers. He threw open the doors to his parents' suite, only to find the enormous bed made and no one in it. He was confused for a moment, his mind still fuzzy from sleep and his vision, but then he remembered.

Moscow.

All of them—his parents, Gerth, Erikir, and the rest of the strongest Chosen—were on their way to Moscow.

“Highness?” a tentative voice came from the doorway. “Is there anything I can do for you?”

Tol spun around. He kept his left side, the side with the shirt sleeve hanging limp, facing the wall. It was something he'd done since primary school, where he'd first learned to be ashamed of his missing arm. The motion had become such habit he barely realized he did it anymore.

“Assemble the scholars,” Tol said. “Tell them to bring their maps.”

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