

THE FORSAKEN'S CHOICE

THE FOUNT BOOK 2

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PROLOGUE

2000 YEARS EARLIER

On a cold mountaintop, with the gods as their only witnesses, they fought.

Her weapon was her mind. His was his fists. Both were evenly matched and equally ferocious.

The Celestial and the Supernal—neither god nor human—battled for their people and for themselves.

No blood was spilled, since the beings' veins ran with something far more powerful: pure Source. It was part of their essence, just like it was part of the world they were made to guard and protect. As they rained down blows on each other, Source leaked from their wounds. The mountainside was already slick with it.

"Your Chosen are weak of body," the Supernal snarled. "They are greedy, taking whatever they can just to taste power."

A crack of thunder echoed his words.

"And yours are weak of spirit." The Celestial pushed back her opponent with another slice from the talons of her mind. "They seek only to dominate. They are barbarians."

The Supernal's fist, tougher than any metal and pulsing with magic, slammed into the Celestial.

A wheeze of air made it out of her before she collapsed in a drift of snow.

The Supernal circled the other being.

He towered over her. His long, golden hair was tinged with the blue of his magic. His black eyes, rimmed with gold, fixed on the Celestial.

"The gods care nothing for your beloved Chosen," the Supernal taunted. "I will banish them from existence. There will be none to mourn their passing."

"The Chosen are mine protect," the Celestial hissed. She rose to her feet. "Mine to defend." An unnatural glow took hold of her ebony skin. Her eyes became pools of pure silver light. "Mine to love."

Both beings were lifted off the mountain's summit by the force of her fury. They hung above the clouds, suspended, as their ages-long battle raged.

The Supernal struck out. His fist met nothing but frosty air.

The Celestial was illuminated as silver flames spilled from her very being. They didn't burn her. They were of her.

The air rippled, and the flames winked out of existence as the Celestial gathered her strength. The Supernal raised his fists, but it was too late.

A tremendous burst of power shot toward him.

The Supernal staggered back.

The Celestial raised her hands to the heavens, and raw magic flooded her system. When she spoke, her voice cut through the wind and thunderclaps.

"Your people will be bereft of guidance. There will be no one to deliver their pleas to the gods. They will be Forsaken."

The Supernal tried to retaliate, but the Celestial showed him no mercy. She hurled another wave of power at him. He cried out.

The Supernal, one of the two strongest beings in all the worlds, fell back to the mountain's summit on his knees. The blue light illuminating his fists began to dim.

"Surrender!" the Celestial shrieked. She was filled to the brim with the gods' strength.

"My people will avenge me," the Supernal choked.

The Celestial laughed. The sound was beautiful and terrible. Her voice was louder than the howling wind when she called, "Your people are leaderless."

The air crackled with the electric heat of magic. Both beings were silent and unmoving, but their struggle continued. The battle was fought in their minds, with power so old and terrible none but the gods could comprehend it.

Their screams came in unison—the Supernal's of defeat, and the Celestial's of victory.

A ball of light and power, brighter and hotter than any sun, hovered just above the Supernal's head. He looked up and saw it. Then, he collapsed in an unconscious heap.

Still gasping for breath, and with rivulets of Source leaching from her body, the Celestial pulled out the obsidian stone she had carried for millennia in anticipation of this moment. Trembling from exhaustion and the amount of strength needed to complete the task, the Celestial steadied her hand. She squeezed her eyes shut.

The ball of power hovering over the Supernal was sucked into the obsidian stone. It glowed bright blue before settling back to its original color.

The stone scorched the Celestial's palm and tore through her insides. She could not survive contact with the enemy's power for long.

"You have been defeated," the Celestial told the unconscious Supernal in a hoarse voice. "I banish you to the mortal world. You will live for an eternity, devoid of your strength and your people."

With her remaining strength, the Celestial opened a portal between the two worlds.

A swirling vortex dropped down from the sky. An unnatural wind swept the Celestial's black locks across her face. She shielded her face from the flying bits of ice and rock as she watched the Supernal's body lift into the air.

His limp body hovered. The only part of him that moved was his long, golden hair as it whipped in the wind. His eyes cracked open just before the edge of the vortex made contact with his body.

The Supernal's shriek of pain and fury was dampened by the effect of the portal. He writhed and reached for a power that was no longer a part of him.

The Celestial stood on the mountain's summit, with the obsidian stone still burning a hole through her hand, as the Supernal cursed her name.

She watched until he was swallowed up into the void.

CHAPTER 1

ADDY

The Texas heat smacked Addy in the face the moment she stepped off the plane. Her T-shirt fused to her sweaty skin. The air even smelled hot, like she was entering a furnace. As she walked down the stairs of Tol's plane and onto the tarmac at the Corpus Christi Airport, she tried to shield her face from the brutal Texas sun. Her hair was red enough. There was no need to add lobster-burned skin to complete the look, thank you very much.

Private planes got private airstrips and a welcoming committee, apparently. Airport people wearing those orange-and-yellow reflective vests were milling around and doing whatever airport people did when a private plane arrived. Addy ignored all of them. She raced to the edge of the tarmac where Aunt Meredith was waiting.

Addy threw herself into her aunt's waiting arms. The force of her hug sent Aunt Meredith's cowboy hat flying off her head. Despite being in her late fifties, Aunt Meredith squeezed Addy until her ribs compressed.

Aunt Meredith's tanned, sun-wrinkled face wavered in and out of focus as Addy blinked through her tears. She had thought she was all cried out, but the sight of her aunt, who looked so much like her mom, brought the water works right back to life.

Aunt Meredith's arms fell away from Addy, but it was only to make room for Livy. Addy wrapped one of her arms around her twin and the other around her aunt. They were all crying and enveloping each other in a three-way hug.

"Oh, my girls," Aunt Meredith said when they finally broke apart. "Welcome home."

It wasn't home, but it was the closest Addy and Livy had after what had happened to the rest of their family. Addy and Livy had been babies when their parents moved away from Texas. Neither one of them remembered any home aside from their upstate New York corn farm.

Addy had only recently learned about the reason for her parents' paranoia and the sheltered life she and her sisters had led. She had discovered Sue and Gary Deerborn weren't her birth parents, and that she was the Forsaken general's daughter.

A familiar anger tightened Addy's chest. If only her parents had told her the truth. If only she had known, maybe she could have prevented....

"Are you going to introduce us, Addy?"

Tol's black velvet voice banished her bitter thoughts. Addy stepped back, making room for the others to join their little circle.

"Aunt Meredith, this is—"

The prince of a magical race from another world. The love of my life.

The man destined to blood marry my sister.

"—Tol."

Raising an eyebrow at her, like he understood all the thoughts racing through her head, Tol stepped forward and took Aunt Meredith's hand.

"It's a pleasure to finally meet you," Tol said.

His English accent made his polite words downright swoon-worthy. Not that Addy was the swooning type...but for Tol, she could make an exception.

“Aren’t ya’ll the most beautiful men I’ve ever seen.” Aunt Meredith’s gaze moved from Tol, to Erikir, to Gerth. She took in their bronze skin, black hair, and dark eyes. Aunt Meredith couldn’t even see the golden Haze surrounding all of them, which only added to their unearthly good looks.

“I don’t know about my associates, but I prefer suave and debonair,” Gerth said, grinning as he shook Aunt Meredith’s hand.

Gerth’s black hair was falling out of its messy pony tail. His shirt had come untucked on one side of his baggy jeans. He was a foot shorter than Tol and Addy, and he had to tip his head up to meet their gazes. Unlike Erikir, Gerth’s dark eyes shone with mischief and good humor.

Gerth had been Tol’s best friend since they were kids, and it had taken Addy about two seconds to understand why. Brilliant didn’t even begin to describe Gerth. He was also funny and one of the most loyal people Addy had ever met. She was grateful he was with them now.

Erikir scowled at Gerth before giving Aunt Meredith’s hand a quick shake. He crossed his arms and stepped back, looking stiff and uncomfortable. His mouth was pressed in a disapproving line.

Addy wasn’t sure if Erikir’s bad mood was something that she brought out, or if it was just a state of being for Tol’s cousin. Addy suspected the latter.

To say Addy wasn’t a fan of Erikir would be the understatement of the century. In the limited time she’d known him, Erikir had mocked Tol’s prosthetic arm, claimed he would make a better prince of the Chosen, and scoffed at Addy’s Forsaken fighting abilities. In turn, Addy had dangled Erikir over a cliff and threatened to drop him.

“Hiya, sweet boy,” Aunt Meredith said to Fred.

It was hard to tell which one of them was the bear in their bear hug, since they both somehow managed to engulf the other.

Addy felt a sharp pang of guilt at the thought of everything her best friend was giving up to be here now.

With Mr. Brown’s health failing from Multiple Sclerosis, Fred had taken over the lion’s share of the farm work. He also ran a side business of building furniture and fixing any piece of machinery the residents of Nowell, New York could dig out of their garages. Both parts of Fred’s business were suffering because he was here to help her.

“Come on, ya’ll.” Aunt Meredith looped one arm through Addy’s and the other through Livy’s. “Let’s get into the air conditioning before you fry up like green tomatoes.”

She directed the guys to a cab after shoving a wad of cash into Fred’s unwilling hand. She steered Addy and Livy to her beat-up old truck. The engine had barely roared to life before Aunt Meredith said, “Alright, girls. Tell me what in the Sam Hill is going on.”

Addy and Livy had a brief, silent exchange. Livy put a finger on her nose, which meant *not it*. Addy stuck her tongue out in an act of petty revenge.

“We need to get some supplies together in the next couple of days,” Addy began. “Then, Livy’s going to re-open the portal between the two worlds so we can go searching for the Celestial—she’s this godlike being who gave all her powers to Livy—and try and get her to shift those powers to me. Then, Tol and I are going to use those powers

together in a...um, ritual...to give his people back their immortality and save their ruined world.”

Then, she gave her aunt a quick summary of the Chosen and Forsaken. When she was finished, Addy sat back against the seat and fanned herself.

Aunt Meredith scruffed her short, brown-and-gray hair. It stuck straight up before she replaced her cowboy hat. She let out a long, whistling breath.

“That was a good summary,” Livy said from the backseat. “You get an A for conciseness. Maybe a C- for clarity.”

Addy turned and grinned at her twin sister.

Livy had been quiet for most of the plane ride from London to Texas, and Addy could only imagine how crazy all of this must be for her. It had only been four days since they’d rescued Livy from the Forsaken who had imprisoned her in an Alaskan Air Force Base. After they broke her out, they’d discovered that Livy, and not Addy, was the Fount whose abilities made her the savior of Tol’s race.

Still, Livy was just as calm, cool, and collected as ever. She even looked put together, with her beautiful brown curls swept back in a neat ponytail. There wasn’t so much as a hint of sweat on her flawless skin. Addy, on the other hand, was daydreaming about a cold shower and another round of deodorant.

“Two worlds? Celestial?” Aunt Meredith gave Addy a suspicious look before turning her attention back on the road. “Don’t tell me you girls have been getting into that liberal propaganda again.”

Addy and Livy exchanged an eye roll.

“*The New York Times* isn’t liberal propaganda,” Livy told Aunt Meredith patiently.

“And everything I just told you is real,” Addy added.

Aunt Meredith opened and closed her mouth twice. She looked a little like a fish.

“I know, right?” Addy laughed a little. “I thought I was going crazy at first when Tol told me everything.”

“I didn’t believe your parents.” Aunt Meredith’s voice came out choked, and Addy realized it was because her aunt was crying.

“Aunt Mer—”

“Maybe if I’d listened, I could have done something. Maybe I could have saved them.”

“Don’t,” Addy and Livy said at the same time.

Her aunt’s guilt tore at Addy’s heart, because it was the same guilt she lived with every single day. She didn’t want anyone else she loved to feel that kind of pain.

“It’s the Forsaken general’s fault for ordering their deaths,” Addy said, using the argument Tol gave her every time she started blaming herself. “And I’m going to make sure she pays.”

They all sat in silence for a few minutes, lost in their own thoughts.

Aunt Meredith dabbed her eyes with her sleeve. “Well, you bet your bottom dollar I have a few questions, but we can talk about everything more once you’ve eaten and gotten some shut-eye. But there is one thing I’d like cleared up now.” She took her eyes off the road long enough to glance at Addy. She raised one graying eyebrow.

“What?” Addy asked.

“Pray tell, what kind of ritual involves having six carats’ worth of precious stones on your ring finger, hmm?”

“Oh.”

Addy was still having trouble wrapping her head around the idea of being married by her nineteenth birthday. Not just married, she reminded herself. *Blood married*.

If it was with anyone except Tol, she would have run screaming in the opposite direction. Or sliced the man up with her trusty garden shears. Into tiny pieces.

Addy patted the side pocket of her duffel, comforted by the outline of her weapon. She knew most people would have preferred a sword or gun, but—the logistics of obtaining those kinds of weapons aside—Addy trusted her garden shears. They didn't glow blue like the Forsaken weapons that had been forged on Vitaquias, but it didn't matter. Addy had Source in her blood. That strength made her shears plenty lethal. They'd never failed to protect her.

Plus, there would be a poetic kind of justice in killing her family's murderers with an object that had belonged to them.

"Addy and Tol are perfect for each other," Livy said, coming to the rescue. "And he's crazy about Addy."

"Well, he's better looking than any man I've ever seen, I'll give him that," Aunt Meredith said. "But why the rush, pumpkin?"

So, Addy gave her aunt the abridged explanation of the blood marriage. She explained how it would telepathically link her and Tol for eternity and generate the power needed to restore an entire world.

Addy couldn't let herself think about what would happen if they failed...if Livy remained the Fount and the only way for Tol to save his race was through blood marrying her instead of Addy....

They couldn't fail. That's all there was to it.

Aunt Meredith frowned. "That's a whole lotta pressure for two young people."

"Don't I know it." Addy wiped sweat off her forehead with the hem of her T-shirt.

"That's why you have all of us," Livy reminded her, reaching forward and giving Addy's arm a comforting squeeze. "We'll help you in any way we can."

Addy's heart swelled with gratitude. Growing up, Livy had always known exactly what to say to make Addy feel better. It was no different now.

Addy didn't care what anyone said or how much she looked like the Forsaken general. Livy was her twin in every way that mattered.

They passed the rest of the drive with easy chit chat, just like they used to when Aunt Meredith came to New York to visit. No one talked about how everything was different now, even though Addy knew it was what they were all thinking.

Aunt Meredith turned off the empty road and onto a long, gravel driveway. Cows on either side of the wooden fence snuffed the dusty ground for hidden morsels of grass. Addy stared out at the flat landscape. She took in the longhorn cattle and prickly pear cacti as she waited for some sense of familiarity. It didn't come.

She hadn't been here since she was a baby, but some part of her had been hoping she would remember it. Addy could tell from the expression on her twin's face that Livy didn't have any memory of this place, either.

Aunt Meredith parked the truck under a beautiful old oak tree next to the wooden ranch-style house. In the open front yard, which was brown and desert-looking compared to the lush New York grass she'd grown up with, there was a fire pit and a picnic table. Addy thought she caught the smell of an old campfire in the air. Tiny mason jar lights had been strung across the scrubby trees that bordered the front yard. Addy could only imagine how cool this place would look at night.

The taxi had beaten them to the house, and the guys were waiting in the shade underneath the oak tree. All of them except Tol had stripped down to their undershirts. Even though it was sweltering, Tol kept his long-sleeved shirt in place. Addy knew it was because of his prosthesis that, even among friends and family, he wouldn't want to show more than he had to. It infuriated Addy that people had made him ashamed of something that, as far as she was concerned, was totally badass.

She caught Tol's eye and managed a wink before Aunt Meredith put one arm around Addy's waist and the other around Livy's and led them to the house. The front porch was long and shaded, and the breeze passing through it made the Texas heat bearable. There was a swinging bench on one side of the porch and four wicker chairs on the other. Addy could picture her aunt sitting out here with a sweating glass of iced tea and one of her crossword puzzles as she watched the cattle graze.

The inside was rustic and inviting. Everything was wood—exposed wood beams, polished wood floors, and wood walls. The open family room had two comfy-looking leather couches, end tables covered with framed photographs of the Deerborns, ornate lamps, and bowls overflowing with candy. Basil, chives, and rosemary grew in wooden planters perched on the window sills. The whole place smelled like wood polish and leather. It wasn't her home, and yet, Addy felt right at home.

Tol picked up a framed photograph on the mantle and grinned.

“What?” Addy asked.

In answer, he held it up.

Toddler-Addy was sitting in a high chair, diapered, shirtless, and with her wispy red hair askew. Something green and sticky-looking was smeared all over her face.

“Addy and Livy's first birthday,” Aunt Meredith said, smiling at the photo. “Their favorite color was green, so that was the theme of the whole birthday. Sue had stirred green food coloring into the icing of their cake, and she even had the idea of dyeing the kiddie pool green—”

Aunt Meredith stopped. Her smile faded. Addy knew exactly what was going through her aunt's mind, because it was the same thing going through Addy's.

Her mom, Aunt Meredith's sister, was dead.

It still seemed so impossible. A hundred times a day, Addy caught herself thinking about what her parents and younger sisters would say about what she was doing, before remembering they were gone.

The Forsaken had killed them in their search for Addy, and they'd done it under the orders of Addy's birth mother—the Forsaken general.

Tol put the photo down and came to stand next to Addy. He rested his hand on the small of her back. His silent presence was a comfort, and Addy leaned into his touch.

Aunt Meredith busied herself in the kitchen. A few minutes later, they were all sitting in the family room with mason jar glasses full of homemade lemonade. For a few minutes, the only sounds were the clinking of ice cubes in their glasses and the wind chimes hanging on the front porch. Addy let the comfy couch swallow her up as she tilted her head from side to side, letting the air conditioning work its magic on the back of her neck.

Tol was the first to speak.

“Meredith, there's something you need to know.” He glanced at Addy before continuing. “There are people from my world hunting us. We'll do everything we can to keep you safe, but—”

Aunt Meredith puffed and waved away his concern. "Being the town weirdo isn't as fulfilling as it used to be. I'm ready for a new adventure."

"Yeah, if you call an adventure babysitting a lovesick prince who's going to get us all killed," Erikir muttered.

"Don't be a git," Gerth said, causing the other boy's scowl to turn into a death glare. If they could use their Source to Influence each other, Addy was sure the two of them would be going at it by now.

"I'm not sure you understand," Tol said to Aunt Meredith. "These people are warriors. It's all they know, and they're very good at what they do."

Fred glanced up at the ceiling and around the open floor plan. Addy knew that look. It was the look he got whenever some especially challenging repair was dropped off at his garage under the "We Fix Everything" sign. For Fred, challenging meant that it might take him a whole five minutes to figure out the problem and how to repair it.

"If you've got some tools, I can rig you up some booby traps," Fred told Aunt Meredith. "At least that'll slow down anyone tryin' to get in here."

"Tools are in the shed," Aunt Meredith said with a shrug. "But I don't think any of that's necessary. I have my shotgun if any of these folks start getting too frisky."

Tol shook his head. "A shotgun won't help against these people."

Aunt Meredith took a long swig of her lemonade. "That's what they'll think, too. Right before I blow a hole in their chests."

CHAPTER 2

TOL

The girls were in town gathering the supplies Gerth had listed out. Fred was hard at work with a nail gun and a drill. The rest of them gathered around the coffee table and planned.

Gerth had brought every map of Vitaquias the Chosen had, which turned out to be a lot. He also had dusty tomes full of information about the Celestial. As their self-proclaimed master strategist, Gerth had lists, spreadsheets, and diagrams that documented everything from where the portal would deposit them on Vitaquias, to the most likely place they'd find the Celestial...if she was even still alive.

Gran, who claimed to talk to her dead husband and was suspected of insanity by most of the Chosen, had been the one to suggest that the Celestial might be able to help. Tol had been desperate enough to cling to this one piece of hope, since it was his last chance at spending eternity with the woman he loved...rather than her sister. But the closer it came to actually attempting this mad plan, the more Tol thought he was just kidding himself.

Still, he had to try.

While Gerth and Erikir argued about the time difference between Earth and Vitaquias, Tol slipped into one of the guest bedrooms and shut the door. He pulled out the high-security, encrypted cell phone he'd gotten to replace his old one and dialed his father's number. When it went to voicemail, he tried his mum's.

No answer.

He'd left each of his parents half a dozen messages, but neither of them had called him back. *Were they screening his calls? Were they in trouble?* Tol raked a hand through his hair as guilt gnawed at his insides.

He'd left the manor a week ago. It had been on fire, and there'd been an angry mob coming for him and Addy. In a jealous rage, Nira had told everyone that Tol had found the Fount but wasn't going through with the blood marriage. Then, Tol and his parents had disappeared to go rescue Addy's sister.

Now, his parents were sorting out the disaster he'd created. And he had no idea what was going on.

"No luck, mate?" Gerth asked when Tol came out of the bedroom.

It didn't surprise Tol that Gerth knew exactly who he'd been calling. Not only was Gerth the most brilliant among a race known for the power of their minds, he knew Tol better than just about anyone alive.

Tol shook his head.

Erikir looked up from the books spread out on the coffee table.

"Can you blame them for ignoring you?" he asked Tol.

"Shove off," Gerth said without looking up from the list he was making.

"No." Tol stood to his full height and glared down at Erikir. "Go on. Say what you have to say."

Erikir got to his feet. “If you just did what needed to be done, we wouldn’t be going on this suicide mission. And the rest of our people wouldn’t be on death’s door.”

Tol didn’t respond, because he knew Erikir was right.

“We’ve been through this,” Gerth said, coming to Tol’s defense.

“If I was prince of the Chosen,” Erikir continued, “I wouldn’t put my own happiness above the survival of the rest of our people.”

“I’m not going to let any of our people die.” The words sounded hollow even to Tol. “And you’re not our bloody prince. I am.”

“If your girlfriend’s barbarian of a mother hadn’t murdered my father, I’d be prince right now instead of you.”

That was also true, but Tol wouldn’t give his cousin the satisfaction of hearing him say so.

Tol picked up a framed photograph on one of the end tables. He tapped the glass. “This is Addy’s family. And the general killed them, too. Addy’s as much a victim as any of us.”

“Tell me this.” Erikir crossed his arms. “If you had to pick between Addy and our people, who would it be?”

“Shut your mouth, Erikir,” Gerth said, slamming his book closed.

Words stuck in Tol’s throat. He knew the answer he was supposed to give—the one he’d have to give if it ever came down to it. He just hoped to the gods it wouldn’t.

“See? There.” Erikir pointed an accusing finger at Tol. “You’re worthless as a prince, and you’ll be even worse as a king. Anyone who puts one girl, and the daughter of our enemy no less, above his own people isn’t a king worth following.”

Tol had reached the limits of his patience. It was worse because everything Erikir was saying was true. He had no room for insults on top of the mountain of grief and guilt he was already carrying. Tol snapped. He lunged at Erikir.

They went down in a heap of limbs and shouts.

The Chosen fought others with Influence rather than fists, but since their people weren’t susceptible to Influence, Tol improvised. He’d seen the way Addy fought, and he tried to channel some of her moves. He got in a good punch to his cousin’s face before Erikir hit him in the stomach. The blow drove the air from his lungs.

Erikir’s next punch went wide and glanced off Tol’s prosthesis. A lamp tipped over, and the bulb shattered before Tol got his cousin in a headlock.

Gerth sat on top of Erikir’s legs, which were scrabbling across the wood floor. Fred stood over all of them with his nail gun clutched in his hand. His eyes darted around, like he was trying to decide what to do.

“What. The. Hell?” a feminine voice demanded.

Addy.

They all looked up. Tol’s anger turned to shame in the space of an instant. Addy, Olivia, and their Aunt Meredith were standing in the open doorway, their arms full of supplies.

Meredith looked amused. Olivia looked concerned. Addy was pissed.

Tol let go of Erikir and got to his feet.

“I’m sorry,” Tol said to Meredith, bending down to right the fallen lamp. “This won’t happen again.”

They were guests here, and they were mauling each other like a pack of ravenous wolves. Or Forsaken.

Addy marched over to Erikir and whispered something that made Erikir's face blanch. From the look on Addy's face, Tol knew now wouldn't be the right time to tell her how sexy she was when she was angry.

"Well, now that that's settled, how about some dinner?" Meredith asked cheerily.

* * *

The sky was dark by the time they'd unloaded all of the travel supplies from the truck bed. While Meredith and Fred got the fire going outside, the rest of them made trips back and forth out to the picnic table carrying packages of hot dogs, bags of BBQ crisps, and all the fixings for s'mores.

Tol and Olivia both reached for a stack of paper plates on the kitchen counter. When their fingers brushed, power washed over Tol. His Haze flared a blinding gold. Tol's vision flickered as his perspective changed from his own to Olivia's.

Grimacing, he wrenched his hand away.

Confusion and hurt flashed across Olivia's face, which only made Tol feel worse. He considered apologizing, but instead, he grabbed the plates and headed for the porch.

"Give it a rest, Tol." Gerth jabbed him in the side as soon as they were out of earshot. "Don't you think the poor girl's been through enough?"

Tol knew Gerth was right. Still, he had no idea how to behave around the Fount. She was the one he was destined for, and every time he was near her, he felt the incessant pull of the connection between them.

An involuntary shudder went through Tol.

He didn't want to feel that link with Olivia. He didn't want to feel the tug of her emotions or sense the corner of his mind that lit up whenever she was within arm's reach. That spot in his mind belonged to Addy.

Tol felt like he was swimming against a tide that was constantly and inevitably drawing him closer to Olivia.

"At least be polite," Gerth said. "Don't forget that she's going to be your sister-in-law."

"Right." Tol nodded. "My sister-in-law."

Tol just hoped that was all she'd ever be.

Outside, they settled themselves around the fire. Tol leaned against the trunk of a tree, and Addy sat with her back propped against his legs. Her nearness made some of his tension fade.

As they roasted hot dogs on sticks—a first for Tol, Gerth, and Erikir—Tol asked Meredith about what Addy had been like as a kid. He wanted to know everything about her. He wanted to know about the family he wished he could have met before they became mangled corpses on a kitchen floor.

Olivia and Fred jumped in to add their two cents. Afterward, Gerth regaled them with the story about Gran's first encounter on Earth with a whistling tea kettle. By the time he was finished, everyone was clutching their sides from laughing. Even Erikir's scowl slipped before he remembered to put it back in place.

"Well, in your grandmother's defense," Meredith said, "I can't imagine moving to a whole other world. Your people must have needed to learn a whole new language...a whole new...*everything*." She waved her cowboy hat around as she spoke.

“Our people are born with the ability to pick up any language after hearing it spoken,” Tol explained to Meredith.

“I didn’t know that,” Addy said, her eyes full of awe.

He gave her wink.

“We couldn’t let the mortals find out about us,” Gerth added. “Our only option was to assimilate...and fast.”

While they talked and roasted marshmallows, Tol lets his fingers glide through the strands of Addy’s hair. He loved that he could pick out her piña colada scent even amid the stronger smells of campfire and burnt marshmallow.

For the first time in days, he felt himself relax.

As his eyes drifted shut, the ground beneath Tol lurched. His eyes flew open.

Tol and Addy were both on their feet in a second. Tol had his vial of Source open, and Addy gripped her garden shears. The earth heaved. Particles of dirt jumped in the air. The glasses on the picnic table clattered up and down before smashing to the ground. The oak tree groaned in protest at the movement.

“What the—” Fred put out his arms, like he was a surfer trying to balance on the unsteady ground.

As quickly as it began, the shaking stopped.

Tol looked around for some sign of the Forsaken, but he saw no glowing blue weapons or golden Haze aside from that of his own people. He didn’t see anything that was cause for concern except for a thin crack that cut straight across the front yard.

“Spread out,” Erikir hissed. “They could be anywhere.”

“This has nothing to do with the Forsaken,” Gerth said, his voice uncharacteristically subdued.

“That’s been happening on and off for the past year.” Meredith’s eyebrows pulled down. “No one else in town ever seems to feel it, though.”

Tol’s heart was racing.

Gerth peered down at the crack that had formed across the yard. He strode to the house, measuring his steps and counting out loud as he went. Gerth returned, his face pinched in thoughtful concentration.

“This crack is on the exact location of the portal,” Gerth announced. In response to Meredith, Olivia, and Fred’s confused expressions, he explained. “The Celestial used the last burst of her magic to create a link between the two worlds. Right here.” He pointed at the fissure.

Tol and Gerth exchanged a look.

As Olivia’s nineteenth birthday neared, Vitaquias must be growing less stable. Some of that volatility was seeping through the portal to the mortal world.

“Should we go right now?” Olivia asked, looking petrified at the thought.

Tol opened his mouth, but Gerth spoke first.

“Let’s wait until morning,” Gerth said. “We’re all jetlagged, and if my calculations are right, it’s nighttime on Vitaquias right now. I’d rather arrive when it’s light out.”

Tol agreed.

Addy stepped back until she was leaning against Tol. He wrapped his arm around her as they stared down at the crack in the earth.

They were running out of time.

He didn’t need this fissure in the ground to remind him of it, and yet, here it was.

What if Erikir was right? What if this was just a fool's mission that would get all of them killed and destroy his people's last hope?

The hot dogs he'd eaten earlier turned to rocks in his stomach.

"I understand you need to go to this other world," Meredith said, "but I need you to promise me you'll all come back in one piece."

She looked at Tol.

Tol held Addy tighter, like he could keep her safe with the force of his grip.

"I won't let anything happen to them," he said. Even as he said the words, he knew it was a promise he might not be able to keep.

"Psh, *I'll* make sure we all come back in one piece," Gerth said.

In spite of himself, Tol managed a grin. If anyone could keep them from a horrible, fiery death, it was his best mate.

"Alright," Gerth announced. "Time for bed. I want everyone refreshed and ready for whatever meets us at the other end of that portal tomorrow."

Gerth jabbed a finger at Tol and Addy. "You two especially. I won't have you being anything less than your full strength tomorrow because you spent all night making gaga eyes at each other."

"But I'm not tired, *Mum*," Tol complained, trying for the lightness they'd had a few moments ago.

"Let's just hope that's all they're doing," Erikir said, his perpetual frown deepening to a look of pure disgust.

"In my house, it will be." Meredith pointed an accusing finger at Addy. "I swear I heard your mother shouting at me on the wind when I said you and Tol could share a bedroom."

"We'll behave," Tol promised. "We appreciate you, er, giving us space to be together." And then, thinking about how she might misinterpret his words, he tried to clarify. "I meant together as in just be near each other. We won't do anything. Except sleep."

Addy smacked a palm to her forehead. Gerth snickered.

Tol wished the crack in the ground would widen enough to swallow him up. He was usually good with words, but he was on unfamiliar ground at the moment...both literally and figuratively.

Meredith tilted her head in thought. "As far as I'm concerned, if you're old enough to save a whole world, then you're old enough to share a bed with whomever you choose."

"Anyone?" Addy teased her aunt. "What about a Democrat?"

Meredith looked at Tol the same way she'd looked at the roach that had been unfortunate enough to climb onto the picnic table during dessert. Remembering the way she'd squashed the thing without mercy, Tol put up his hands in surrender and backed away from Addy.

"My people don't have political parties," he hurriedly explained. "We're a monarchy."

"I think it's disrespectful to sleep together before you're married," Fred grumbled into his can of orange soda.

If Tol hadn't been trying to be civil to Fred for Addy's sake, he might question whether Fred's morals would still hold up if the farmer was the one sharing Addy's bed.

Tol didn't bother explaining that he and Addy really couldn't do much more together than sleep until the blood marriage.

The farmer could keep his assumptions.

"The last one in bed will have to play me in chess and suffer the consequences," Gerth warned.

"Right then," Tol said. "I'm off."

Gerth was downright insufferable when he played chess, or really any game for that matter. Or maybe it was just the fact that Gerth never lost that was so insufferable.

They all helped to clean up and put out the fire. In spite of Gerth's threat, Tol let the others file into the house ahead of him. He stared down at the crevice in the ground.

What would they find when they got to the other world?

Did it even still exist?

There was a very real possibility that when Olivia opened the portal, they'd be shot into some kind of black hole because Vitaquias had ceased to exist.

"Hey, you okay?" Addy asked.

He nodded, shaking his head to clear his mind. They'd find out what was happening on Vitaquias soon enough. There was no point in wondering and worrying now.

He was further distracted from his worries as Addy headed for the porch ahead of him. She was wearing shorts that bared her long legs, and Tol couldn't stop himself from thinking about those legs wrapped around his waist.

"Guess I'm losing at chess later," Tol muttered.

"Huh?" Addy turned around to look at him.

He didn't give her time to react before hauling her around the side of the house. He pressed her against the wall and kissed her.

If she was surprised, she didn't show it. She curled her hands into his shirt and dragged him closer as she kissed him back.

She tasted like marshmallow and chocolate. The way she sighed and sunk deeper into the kiss made him lose track of everything except for her. The buzzing of the cicadas was drowned out by their thundering pulses. Their hearts beat in time against each other's chests.

There was nothing gentle about the kiss. It was all heat and desire, and beneath that, desperation. They both knew that, depending on what happened tomorrow, this kiss might be their last.

The thought made him hold her tighter, press closer.

I won't let you go, he thought, even though he knew he might not have a choice. He had responsibilities. He'd made promises he couldn't break.

He wouldn't think about that. Not now. Not yet.

"Tol, Ad-dy! Quit snogging and get in here," Gerth called from inside.

They broke their kiss on a gasp. They were hidden in shadows, but Gerth didn't need to see them to know what they were up to. Sometimes, Tol really hated what a know-it-all Gerth was.

The porch light flickered on and off.

Sighing, Tol stepped back.

"I've been waiting all night to do that," he confessed with an unapologetic grin.

Addy smiled at him. The unguarded love in her expression was enough to leave him breathless.

"I'm going to spend eternity with you," Tol said, reaching up to touch her face.

Addy let out a soft sigh. "I keep forgetting about the whole living forever thing. I guess with the Source inside me, I never needed the blood marriage to become immortal."

A complicated range of emotions passed through her green eyes.

"Forever won't be long enough for a lifetime with you," Tol said, leaning in for another kiss.

"Don't make me send Freddo and his nail gun out there," Gerth called from inside.

Shaking his head in an attempt to clear it, Tol offered Addy his hand. She took it, and together, they went into the house.

CHAPTER 3

OLIVIA

Olivia startled out of a restless sleep. There was a crash, followed by a yelp.

Addy.

Olivia raced down the hall, her heart in her throat. Fred and Tol reached the bathroom first, where more thuds and curses were coming from inside.

Fred practically tore the bathroom door off its hinges as the guys stormed inside. Olivia followed, caught between terror at whatever was inside and a desperation to help her twin however she could. If anything happened to Addy—

Olivia peered around Fred.

Addy, wrapped in a towel and standing on the toilet seat, held an electric toothbrush in her hand like a weapon.

“What’s going on?” Tol demanded, his golden light flaring as they all stared around for the threat.

Olivia jumped as Addy bashed the toothbrush down on the counter. There was a flicker of movement as a small scorpion scuttled out of the way just in time.

“I’ll save you, Ads!” Fred announced, trying to flatten the poor insect with the palm of his hand. He missed by a hair.

“Wanker,” Tol muttered under his breath.

It took Olivia a few more seconds for her panicked brain to understand that there was no emergency.

“Stop!” she cried as Addy brought the toothbrush down again.

Everyone went still.

Squeezing past Tol, Olivia grabbed a hand towel off the rack and approached the counter. The tiny creature faced her, its pincers opening and closing in warning.

As the creature eyed her, Olivia had the fleeting wish that she possessed a small fraction of the scorpion’s bravery.

“Smash it, Livy,” Addy said, climbing off the toilet and adjusting her grip on the toothbrush.

“She’s scared,” Olivia said as she tried to coax the scorpion onto the towel. “I’ll just bring her outside where she belongs.”

“How do you know it’s a *she*?” Tol asked.

“It’s definitely a dude scorpion,” Addy declared. “The thing was creeping on me while I showered.”

“Never thought I’d be jealous of a scorpion,” Tol said pensively.

Olivia tried not to notice the heated gazes Addy and Tol were exchanging as she swept the scorpion into the towel and hurried it outside.

When she came back into the house, Olivia heard Addy speaking to Tol through the closed door of their bedroom.

“...wouldn’t hurt a fly...always called her Sweet Livy.”

Olivia turned away before she eavesdropped any more.

Surrounded by people with superhuman abilities, kindness didn't seem like a useful contribution. Olivia doubted her penchant for saving helpless insects would translate into the skills needed to rescue an alien race.

If only she was more like Addy—who fearlessly charged into mischief and mayhem at every opportunity—instead of the twin who was afraid of her own shadow.

Olivia stood in the quiet hallway, not quite sure what to do with herself. She needed to get some sleep before tomorrow, but she was too restless.

On warm nights when she was back at home, she and Addy used to sneak out after the rest of their family was asleep. They'd lie between the corn stalks and stare up at the stars as they told each other ghost stories.

A raw pain went through Olivia's chest at the memory of the life she'd loved and lost. She dug her nails into her palms, focusing on the half-moon indentations to keep her mind from spiraling out of control with grief and loss.

Olivia forced out a calming breath. And then another.

She headed for the porch, thinking the night air might help calm her thoughts. She wished she had one of her books from home. *The Chronicles of Narnia* would be an appropriate choice given her own upcoming journey. Then again, reading about people who walked into another world was becoming less of a bedtime story and more of a promise for her future.

But of course, Olivia didn't have her beloved book collection with her. The monsters who killed her family hadn't exactly let her pack a bag before they kidnapped her.

Olivia swallowed the lump in her throat at the thought of her parents and younger sisters. That crushing wave of guilt and all those *what ifs* would drown her if she let them. Right now, she had to keep herself together so she'd be able to help Addy. Afterward, when her twin became the Fount and Olivia was just Olivia again, she'd give herself permission to fall to pieces.

She reached for the handle of the door. Everything in front of her disappeared as a black veil slid over her vision. All she had time to think was, *not now*, before her knees gave way.

The moments before the darkness took her were always the worst. Terror swept through her, along with the sense that she had no control over her own mind. She always had just enough presence of mind to wonder if this would be the time the darkness refused to let her go.

It felt like a nightmare that might never end.

Olivia's body thudded to the wood floor. She heard male voices and felt cool fingertips on her cheek. She heard someone say, "Get Tol."

After that, she was aware of nothing except for flashes of images that moved too fast for her to see any of them clearly. It was like someone was flipping through a picture book at lightning speed. It made her head ache.

Someone took her hand, and her vision immediately sharpened. The blackness turned to a bright white that should have blinded her. Instead, it transformed the chaos of her mind into calmness and clarity.

She saw Tol standing beside her. His golden Haze lit up the front yard where the crack in the earth had opened earlier in the night.

Tol inclined his head, and when she followed the direction of his gaze, she saw they weren't alone. A heavysset man in overalls and muck boots was walking the line of the fissure in the lawn.

What're you up to, witch? the man muttered to himself. *What're you up to?*

He knelt on the ground and reached into the fissure.

The man screamed and wrenched his hand back. His entire arm was blackened and smoking.

Run, Olivia thought, her heart fluttering in panic. A dark shadow crept out of the fissure and rose behind the man.

In one swift move, the shadow dragged the man into darkness. Then, it returned for Tol and Olivia. Tentacle-like shadow arms snaked around them. Olivia fought, but it was useless. They were dragged into a blackness as complete as it was endless.

Olivia tried to scream, but no sound came out. She felt the heat of blood pouring from her lips. The taste of copper filled her throat as she choked.

She turned to the side and saw that Tol was as broken as she was. Bones jutted out of torn flesh. Blood streamed from his ears, nose, eyes....

Tol's body dissipated into blue smoke. That was all. One moment he'd been there and alive. The next, he was wisping away into the depths of a waterless black sea.

The vision shattered.

With a gasp, Olivia opened her eyes. She was back in Aunt Meredith's house. Tol was kneeling beside her, his hand still clasped in hers. His olive skin had blanched, but unlike in her vision, he was very much alive.

"Livy? Tol?"

At the sound of Addy's voice, Tol dropped Olivia's hand like it was covered in molten lava. Olivia felt confused, and more than a little overwhelmed.

She added embarrassment to the list when she realized everyone in the house was awake and crowded around her.

"Here you go, sweet pea." Aunt Meredith handed her a cold washcloth.

Olivia gave her aunt a grateful smile as she pressed it to her aching forehead.

Her embarrassment deepened when she realized Erikir, the angry boy who had touched her cheek and called for Tol, was still hovering over her. They were close enough that the silky ends of his black hair brushed against her cheek. He seemed to realize their proximity at the same moment she did, and with a scowl, he retreated to the edge of their circle.

"Did you see that?" Olivia asked Tol, her voice coming out breathy, like she'd just run a mile.

Tol gave a slow shake of his head. "I saw you standing in your aunt's yard." His gaze slid to Addy. He looked...ashamed, like he'd done something wrong by being inside Olivia's vision. It made Olivia feel guilty, even though she still didn't understand what had happened.

Tol continued, "I felt your fear, and I knew you were seeing something terrible just out of my line of sight. And then," he paused, and Olivia saw a shiver go through him. "I saw you die."

"What?!" Addy demanded.

Olivia swallowed. With her voice trembling only a little, she recounted what she had seen. When she was finished, she expected to see skepticism written across everyone's faces. Maybe even derision. After all, she'd just had a vision that made no sense.

Instead, Tol and Gerth exchanged a look that was full of meaning. And then the two of them got to their feet and hurried for the door. Olivia stood on unsteady legs. Addy wrapped her arm around Olivia's waist as they followed the others out into the yard.

A choked sound escaped Olivia's lips as Aunt Meredith flipped on the porch light. There was a man in overalls and work boots standing on the lawn. It was the same man from her vision.

"Anthony Fowler, what in the Sam Hill are you doing on my property?" Aunt Meredith stalked across the yard in her bathrobe and cowboy boots.

Addy, Tol, Erikir, and Gerth's Hazes flared to life. Aunt Meredith and Fred, standing with their arms crossed, looked almost as lethal.

"Aunt Meredith, who is this guy?" Addy asked, gripping her garden shears.

"A nosy neighbor who needs to learn to respect property lines, that's who," their aunt replied, still glaring at the man—Anthony Fowler.

"We got laws 'gainst blowin' shit up," Fowler said. He took a toothpick out of his pocket and stuck it between his teeth.

"I haven't been blowing anything up, and I'll thank you to watch your mouth," Aunt Meredith replied. "I don't want my nieces and their friends to think *all* of my neighbors are lowbrows."

Fred and Gerth snickered.

Fowler squinted at all of them. "You gonna claim there was *another* earthquake that only hit *yer* land?"

"I'm not claiming anything," Aunt Meredith said coolly.

"You upset my cows," Fowler persisted.

"You give your cows too much credit," Aunt Meredith replied. "I imagine if the sight of you doesn't put them off their feed, then neither will a little earthquake."

Olivia clapped a hand over her mouth to keep from laughing out loud. All of her mirth transformed to horror in a heartbeat as Fowler knelt down next to the crack in the ground.

Everything, from the positioning of his body to the way Tol's light illuminated his profile, was the same as it had been in her vision.

"Don't!" Olivia shouted.

Fowler ignored her. He bent down to poke at the crack in the earth.

The man's scream reverberated in her ears.

When he pulled his arm out of the crack, it was blackened and smoking. An awful, burning flesh smell assailed her nose.

"Oh my Lord!" Aunt Meredith shouted.

Olivia watched in muted horror as her vision came to life before them.

"Tol, what's happening?" Addy demanded.

Tol shook his head.

"This is exactly what I saw in my vision," Olivia said, her insides cringing at the sight of the man's arm shriveling and shrinking. The farmer let out an agonized howl.

"What do we do?" Fred demanded.

Olivia exchanged a look with Tol. Her nerves tingled a second before she saw something black creep up from the earth's crevice.

"Watch out!" Olivia yelled as that oozing black shadow began spilling out of the crack in the ground.

It was too late. The shadow grabbed hold of the screeching man's foot. It was already sucking him into its depths. Everything was happening exactly the same way it had in her vision, and she was powerless to help the man.

"Grab my hand," Tol ordered Fowler.

Panic unfurled in Olivia's stomach.

"No," she gasped. "You can't."

Olivia knew that if any of them touched that black shadow, they'd be sucked into its depths and killed, just like she and Tol were in her vision.

She ran forward. Olivia grabbed Tol's arm and wrenched him back just before his fingers reached into the pool of shadows. He stumbled into her, and both of them fell back into Addy. They collapsed in a heap on the ground just as Fowler and the black shadow were sucked into the fissure. The crack in the earth was only a few inches wide, and yet, it somehow swallowed up the entire man.

Fowler's desperate cries cue off. All that was left was silence.

"Oh, Lord. Oh, Lord. Oh, Lord!" Aunt Meredith clutched Olivia with a grip tight enough to bruise.

"What the hell happened?" Fred asked.

Gerth, Tol, and Erikir looked as confused as the rest of them. Their uncertainty scared Olivia even more than the fact that she'd just seen a man die before her eyes.

"We have to call the police," Aunt Meredith said. "Then, we're going out to buy more guns. Whatever's happening, we need to be able to defend ourselves. I'll need to call Anthony's wife, and—"

Aunt Meredith stopped pacing back and forth. She pinned Olivia and Addy with the stern gaze their mother only used when nothing else would suffice.

"You are *not* going into that other world. No, madams. You're all the family I have left, and I'm not letting you get burned up or swallowed whole or whatever else just happened to that man. Do you hear me?!"

Olivia looked at her twin.

Addy bit her lip. She looked at Tol.

"Tell me if you want me to do it," he murmured.

Cold shivered through Olivia in spite of the warm air. She'd seen Tol and the rest of his people use their mind control before, and she understood this was what Tol was offering to do to their aunt now.

"Don't you dare." Fred stomped over and pointed a finger in Tol's face. "Don't you even think about using your freaky mind control on Meredith. I won't let you."

"How do you plan to stop me, Farmer Fred?" Tol asked, before sliding a guilty glance in Addy's direction. In a more subdued tone, he told Addy, "I won't influence her unless you want me to."

Aunt Meredith was still pacing and talking to herself, completely oblivious to the argument that was going on about her.

"What should we do?" Addy asked Olivia.

All eyes turned to her.

Why are you asking me?! she wanted to shout.

Instead, she took a few deep breaths. She tried to assess their problem and potential solutions, the way she'd seen Gerth do these last few days.

Olivia knew the answer she needed to give. She couldn't bear to put her aunt in any more danger. She'd already lost the rest of her family.

She turned to Tol, her throat burning with emotion.

"Do it," she told him. "Just...don't take away her memories any more than you have to."

"You people are unbelievable," Fred accused.

Addy looped her arm through Olivia's. Olivia was grateful for her sister's presence as Tol went to Aunt Meredith and said, "Look at me."

When their aunt's eyes glazed over and her frown turned to a sleepy smile, a sick feeling twisted in Olivia's gut.

But what else could we have done? she argued with herself. *It's the only way to keep her safe.*

"I'm off to bed," Aunt Meredith announced a few moments later. Her eyes were a little unfocused, but other than that, she seemed completely normal. "Make sure ya'll have a good breakfast before you head out for your little vacation."

Aunt Meredith pulled Olivia and Addy into a hug. Olivia clung to her aunt, wishing she didn't have to let go.

"Do you have any idea how messed up that was?" Fred demanded when Aunt Meredith was out of earshot.

Olivia chewed on her bottom lip. She knew Fred was right.

"It was the best of bad options," she said, not quite sure whether she was trying to convince Fred or herself. "At least here, your booby traps will help keep her safe."

Addy nodded, but her face mirrored Olivia's regret.

"There was nothing else to be done," Tol said. "Any mortal who knows about our world is a threat to us and themselves."

"I know everythin' and I'm not a threat," Fred argued.

"The only reason you aren't bumbling around with no memory is out of respect for Addy." Tol gave Fred a pointed glare. "But don't think for one second I'll hesitate to influence you if your involvement in our affairs endangers any of my people."

"Are you threatenin' me?" Fred snarled.

"Look, what my less-than-diplomatic mate is trying to say," Gerth offered, holding out his hands in a conciliatory way, "is that we're doing our best to stay under the radar. If mortals discovered another race was living among them, using other-worldly gifts to control their governments and militaries, they'd be hells-bent on eradicating us."

"That wouldn't happen," Fred said weakly.

Erikir scoffed. "We know your planet's history and what happens to those who are different."

"Oh yeah," Fred retorted. "Because your planet sounds like a regular paradise."

"This is all a little bit irrelevant at the moment," Gerth interrupted before Fred and Erikir came to blows. "Everyone get your things. "We're out of here in ten."

* * *

Aunt Meredith's rooster wall clock told Olivia it took everyone exactly eight minutes to get dressed and finish packing the huge bags now strapped to their backs. When they went outside, the sky was just beginning to lighten. Normally, Olivia would think the gray-blue color of the sky was beautiful. After the vision she'd just had, everything seemed painted in different shades of *ominous*.

By silent agreement, they all made their way to the fissure that had swallowed up Aunt Meredith's neighbor only a short while ago. Olivia was still trembling from watching her vision play out in real life before her eyes.

The closer she got to the crack in the earth, the more Olivia felt a strange tug inside her. It was like there was an invisible string connecting her to the site of the portal. The closer she got, the more taut the string became. Her feet brought her closer and closer, even though her brain told her to run away...to go back into the farmhouse and crawl into bed with Aunt Meredith.

Olivia stood next to Addy, trying to calm her hummingbird-quick pulse, and waited. She expected Tol, Gerth, and Erikir to drink from those vials around their necks and do something magical. When nothing happened, she looked around.

Everyone was staring at her.

“We need your blood to open the portal,” Gerth explained to Olivia, who imagined she was looking very much like a deer in the headlights. “Just don’t get too close to that crack in the ground until the portal opens.”

Olivia shivered at the memory of the shadow that had dragged a full-grown man into the narrow fissure. She took a step back.

“Just a second,” Addy said, squinting at the guys in suspicion. “How much blood are we talking?”

“Not much,” Gerth replied, giving Olivia a kind smile.

Olivia wasn’t afraid of blood. Minor injuries came with the job when one worked with farm equipment and the Cluckers—their family’s five hens. Still, it felt different to cause her body harm on purpose.

Addy wrapped an arm over Olivia’s shoulders in a protective gesture that made Olivia feel like she was the younger sister instead of Addy’s twin.

“It’s okay,” Olivia heard herself say.

Do it for Addy, she reminded herself.

Olivia used Addy’s garden shears to prick her finger. Blood immediately beaded up along the cut.

“Drip your blood right onto the ground near the crack,” Gerth told her.

She did as she was told. As soon as her first drop of blood fell, the ground beneath their feet began to shake. If it hadn’t been for Addy’s arm wrapped around her, Olivia would have lost her footing.

My blood, Olivia thought dazedly. *My blood is causing an earthquake.*

The wind picked up. Olivia’s loose curls whipped across her face as a spiraling cyclone of dust and debris formed in the place where her blood had fallen.

Something inside Olivia—like energy or molten fire—began to churn. Normally, she’d default to *terrified* right about now. But there was no room for fear.

She felt strong, although strong enough to do what, she couldn’t say. Something old and ancient that she didn’t understand stirred inside her. It was a part of her and also separate from her. It made no sense, but she didn’t have time to question it.

Olivia felt the vortex of swirling dust dragging at her. Her feet slid forward an inch.

Without warning, a tremendous boom rippled the air around them. The sky bent and warped. There was the sound of nails on a chalkboard, or maybe the pages of a giant book being ripped out. It was like the sky was tearing apart at its seam.

Her stomach dropped. Her breath snagged in her lungs. She wanted to run...hide...scream.... But she was frozen.

Through the rip in the sky, Olivia saw colors and movement. Everything blurred together until all she could see was a shimmery film.

Olivia had never been so desperate to run toward and away from something at the same time.

The color rippled again. Olivia thought she caught sight of mountains and a castle on a cliff. When she blinked, the image disappeared.

The temperature in the air was dropping...fast. Wind and dust and energy swirled around Olivia until she could barely think...could barely breathe.

“Go!” Gerth shouted from behind them.

Addy tugged Olivia’s arm. Together, they stepped closer to the seam in front of them. A faint light began to pulse at its center. It looked like a tornado made out of color. It was beautiful and terrible all at once.

That was Olivia’s last thought before she was swallowed into the portal’s swirling depths.