

Shifters: Horizons

Wendy Fehr

Published by **Shifterspress** at Smashwords

shifterspress.ca

Saskatoon, Saskatchewan



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ISBN: 978-0-9877398-1-0

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Prologue

I pulled my light sweater on and began walking through the park, taking my usual path home. With my bike out of commission, I was on foot tonight, and I hoped the walk wouldn't take much longer than when I biked. I glanced up at the sky, noting the indigo hues closing in on the last burgundy rays of the sun. I frowned and quickened my pace. I surveyed the area as I walked, pulling the straps of my backpack closer together. I calculated the distance to the street, the edge of the park seeming to extend beyond its usual borders.

How can walking take so much longer than biking?

I was nearing the border of the park when the breeze picked up, swirling around my face. The smell of rotten potatoes or some other type of garbage pressed in on me and I coughed as my lungs seized, refusing to take in the foul air. I glanced over my shoulder, seeing only the darkening shapes of the trees and the mottled shadows of the leaves against the navy sky.

I shivered as I hurried through the park. Suddenly, my chest tightened and my muscles tensed. I slowed my pace. I stopped and turned, looking in all directions, trying to see through the enclosing shadows. I peered back down the path and heard a faint noise. Wait. No, not a noise—a rhythm. It felt like the thumping of a loud car stereo in the distance as it pulsed against my eardrums. My brows drew together as I focused on the feeling of the beating in my ears.

It descended on me suddenly: a strong sense of déjà vu. I froze, locked in the moment. I stood, unable to move, while in my mind I watched myself peering into the darkness as the seconds slowly passed. With a sudden jolt like that of a harsh awakening, the two scenes slammed together again.

Run!

It was a fraction of a second before I thawed and could command my muscles to move. I turned and raced down the path toward the end of the park and the beckoning streetlights, my heartbeat drowning out the hypnotic rhythm in my ears, and my bag thudding against my back. I heard scuffling behind me then a clang of metal striking metal. I didn't turn around. I ran faster.

I didn't stop until I had reached the perimeter of the park where the path met the sidewalk on a busy and brightly lit street. The roar of wheels on concrete and the light pouring down from streetlamps contrasted sharply with the shadows from which I had just emerged. I stopped, pulling air into my lungs as the drumming in my ears quieted. I paused, turning reluctantly to gaze into the black nothingness of the park. Nothing stirred.

Probably just my imagination.

I took one last look down the darkened path. I saw a flash of movement deep in the shadows and drew a sharp breath. I squinted, trying to see into the inky stillness. After a moment, the scene lightened and I could see—or maybe I only thought I could see—a figure moving away among the trees on the side of the path. The figure paused then and slowly turned. My breath caught. I stared, only just making out the shape of a long coat reaching down to heavy boots and one brief glint of light on metal.

My heart skipped a beat then raced forward. I reeled back a step or two before moving swiftly down the street, into the reassuring light of the street lamps. I didn't slacken my pace until I was home.

Chapter 1: Beginnings

Okay, admittedly, this was not the best idea I'd ever had. Unfortunately, I only realized that halfway down the hill, at a point where it was impossible to turn around. Sure, I ought to have listened to that "little voice" inside my head telling me that this would end badly. Instead, I had offered up the brilliant argument that this would be a great shortcut home from campus each day. I had ignored the slight panic that made breathing difficult and began my descent. I hadn't listened to that voice and now it was far too late to do anything about it.

To be honest, it had been a lot of fun up to that point: that rush of adrenaline as I felt the steep pitch; the thrill of tightly controlled fear as my speed increased; the brush of the wind on my face as it whipped curls of my hair loose. It had been going well too, until I lost my hold on my brakes. That wouldn't have even happened if my bicycle tire hadn't hit some unseen object causing the wheel to jerk violently to the left and wrenching the handlebars from my grip. It had happened in the same instant that I had turned to follow a flash of shadow darting through the bushes to my left.

Really, if all that hadn't happened I would have been just fine. But as it was

I now found myself on an out-of-control bicycle, tree branches whipping past, scraping my cheeks and pulling at my hair as I careened down the hill. I looked ahead and my stomach lurched violently. The path was about to curve to the left, but my bike certainly wouldn't be going in that direction. My bike was heading straight ahead—with me on it—through a short expanse of brush and beyond that to the sheer drop of the riverbank.

Breathe!

And I did—I gasped. I had been so busy worrying about the course my bike was taking me down that I had neglected to notice the rather large tree looming up in front of me just where the path turned at the bottom of the hill. Every fiber of every muscle seized and I could only sit, hanging on for the ride, as my bike connected with the tree. One second I was hurtling down the hill and the next second—well, I wasn't.

For the smallest fraction of time, I knew my bike had stopped. I also knew that I had not. I felt the bike jerk to a halt just before I was catapulted over the handlebars. I expected my head to smash into the tree. It was only when that didn't happen that I realized my bike had tipped over. In my peripheral vision I saw the tree fly past—exactly one quarter of a second before I saw the bushes coming at me.

My muscles thawed then and so did my brain. I considered trying to stop myself, but quickly realized there was no way to do that.

If you can't beat 'em, join 'em.

Instead of trying to slow my momentum I threw myself into it, tucking my body tightly and bracing myself, knowing I would be landing with a disagreeable amount of force. The move launched me over most of the bushes and I managed to land in a neat shoulder roll. I was feeling rather pleased with myself until I realized I hadn't stopped moving yet.

A few straggling bushes swiped at my cheeks and arms as I rolled down the hill—straight

toward the riverbank's edge. I assumed there was water beyond that, but I wasn't keen on verifying that assumption. I twisted my body around out of my roll, frantically grasping for anything that would stop my slide over the edge of the bank.

Nothing! Still sliding!

Then, all at once, the ground beneath me was gone and I was airborne. I jerked to a stop, my feet dangling in midair over the water. I could hear the rush of the river flowing past and smelled the musty scent of wet mud, but I didn't look down. I looked up, trying to understand why I wasn't in the water. I followed my outstretched arm up to where my hand held tightly to a tree root jutting out of the side of the sandy riverbank. I hung there attempting to figure out what had just happened.

After a moment, I reached up with my free hand, groping for something to hold on to so I could pull myself up. Suddenly I heard movement on the riverbank above. My heart, still pumping hard from the tumble, began to pound when a guttural snarl reached my ears. I heard leaves scuffling and smelled the dank, clingy odour of wet dog.

Maybe you're safer down here.

Maybe. The problem was, my arm was getting tired. I had to do something. Holding on to the tree root with both hands, I glanced up and listened. I heard only rustling as the wind danced through the leaves above and past my ears. I let go of the root with one hand and cautiously reached up, blindly feeling for a handhold to pull myself up onto the bank.

I gasped when a vice-like grip clamped down on my wrist. Panic tightened my chest and I tried to pull my hand back, but it was caught in a firm hold. It took a moment for me to understand that nothing had bitten me—I felt no teeth in my flesh, only a steady, painless burn. I looked up from my less than ideal position directly into a pair of steel blue eyes.

Oh my.

The eyes peering over the edge of the bank were framed by a perfectly balanced face with a square-set jaw. I had seen that face once before. The eyes held me every bit as firmly as the grip on my arm, one eye partly covered by the dark hair that fell across it. The boy looked to be roughly my age. He also looked decidedly unhappy. I briefly considered saying "Thanks, but I can manage just fine on my own" in my haughtiest tone, but I knew only too well I was in no position to do that.

The boy stood and pulled me up. I let go of the tree root and tried to use my other hand to push myself up, but soon realized any assistance on my part was unnecessary as the boy straightened and effortlessly lifted me up onto the riverbank. He deposited me on my feet, still holding on to my wrist. He considered me briefly—just long enough to scan me from head to toe—then turned, and pulled me along through the short tuft of scratchy brush until we were both standing on the path and well away from the water's edge. Only then did he release my arm, leaving me with a residual sting where his hand had been. I rubbed my wrist as I studied him.

His grip must have been tighter than I thought.

I looked down at his hand as he flexed it, then back up at his face. The boy's expression was sober as he stood, peering cautiously into the bushes surrounding us. I surveyed the area, remembering the sound I had heard a moment ago.

"Are you all right?" the boy suddenly demanded, making me jump slightly, and recalling my attention. He glanced to the brush on the other side of the path then finally turned back to me.

My stomach tightened when our eyes locked. I stared stupidly at him.

He's waiting ...

“Umm ...” It took me a moment to recall what he had asked. I moved my left hand to my right shoulder and lifted my arm cautiously. A twinge of pain shot through my shoulder and my mind flashed to my harsh landing. I’d pay for that tomorrow. I reached to absentmindedly brush at the scratches on my cheek, starting up a mild burn in them. My hand went to my head next. My brow creased. I had been wearing a helmet a moment ago ...

“Are you hurt?” the boy repeated more slowly, enunciating each word.

I turned back to him. He stood studying me intently with deep blue eyes, his brows drawn together.

“I ... I don’t think so,” I finally stammered. “I’m fine,” I added, trying to infuse my words with a bit more certainty this time. “Thanks for helping.” I thought for a moment then studied him curiously. “How on earth did you get there so fast? You weren’t on the trail when I was coming down.”

His eyes darted to mine as he squared his shoulders. His brow lifted in surprise for the briefest moment before he rearranged his features into a calm expression.

“I was coming down the other side when I saw you fall.” He studied my face as he spoke, his eyes narrowed speculatively.

“Oh, you saw that, did you?” I asked, feeling a warmth spread over my cheeks. I looked away. I could see him nod in my peripheral vision and I winced, the scrapes on my cheek stinging again. “Um, yeah, not terribly elegant, huh? Serves me right,” I said with a self-deprecating laugh. “Never take on a tree—trees always win.” I forced myself to lift my eyes to his.

A crooked grin tugged at the corner of the boy’s mouth and my breath caught in my throat. I paused and forced myself to rein in my straying thoughts.

Just a little off track.

“Did you see anything up here on your way down?” I asked him, scanning the nearby bush warily. “I thought I heard some sort of animal.” When he didn’t answer, I looked back at him. He considered me again. His expression, stern at first, quickly turned skeptical.

“Are you certain you’re not hurt?” he asked. “That was a nasty fall.”

“I’m sure. I’ll be fine,” I repeated.

“That was a neat tuck and roll—likely saved your neck. And how did you grab that tree root in mid-fall? I expected to find you in the river,” he asked, studying me curiously.

“Well ...” I hedged, giving him what I hoped was a casual smile, “it all happened pretty fast ... just survival instincts I suppose.” I dropped my gaze, my heart picking up pace. I wasn’t lying, I told myself—not exactly.

When the boy didn’t respond, I reluctantly looked back up at him, pasting a friendly smile on my face. He simply stood, watching me with a calculating expression. His chin lifted a centimetre before he nodded slowly, continuing to scrutinize me through narrowed eyes. I lowered my gaze, my smile fading. It was then that I saw my helmet lying on the ground a little way up the trail.

Grateful for the excuse to end his line of questioning, I made my way back up the path, retrieving my backpack along the way. I picked up my helmet and frowned, studying the long crack that ran up the side of it.

“Lucky you had that on.”

I jumped and turned to see the boy standing just a little too close behind me. I took half a step back. His brow creased as he regarded me dubiously.

“Is your head all right? Maybe I should take you to a hospital. I’d feel better if a physician examined you,” he suggested, a frown on his face.

“Oh, that’s not necessary,” I replied a little too hastily. “My head is fine—well protected.” I forced a grin and held up the helmet for illustration purposes. The boy said nothing, his frown remaining firmly in place. “Really,” I insisted. “Just a sore shoulder,” I added, moving my arm to test it out. My shoulder complained more bitterly than it had before.

The boy studied me for a moment longer, his frown slowly dissolving into a sober expression. He stiffened slightly then—if that were possible in his already uncompromisingly perfect posture—and glanced back over his shoulder toward the brush behind him. I looked back too but saw nothing aside from the brush. Suddenly the boy was walking past me and up the path. My heart skipped a beat then lurched forward double time as I hurried after him.

Jumpy much?

I peered back over my shoulder at the brush again, but still saw nothing. The trail grew steeper and my left knee sent out a warning spasm as I hurried after the boy. Trying not to limp, I only caught up with him when he stopped where my bike lay. I took a quick breath to calm my racing heart as the boy stooped to pick up my bike. He set it on its wheels and steadied it with one hand. We stood, halfway to the top of the slope, considering the mangled front rim of my bike, its tire flat. The boy frowned at it.

Lovely. Now what?

Maybe Jess could come get me—but she would be working for another hour.

“I don’t suppose this will get you very far,” the boy said, reclaiming my attention. He continued to study the wreckage that was my bike. He turned, contemplating me for a moment. “I should take you home,” he said decisively. “The bike ought to fit in the trunk of my car.”

Oh, I so don’t think so!

I was about to object when the boy turned, and in one fluid motion that seemed just a little too fast, effortlessly swung the bike off the ground and onto his shoulder. He started up the slope at a brisk pace with me trailing after him, still trying (unsuccessfully) not to limp. Suddenly the boy stopped and turned, watching the brush through narrowed eyes. After a moment more, he gestured with his free hand for me to precede him up the hill. I heard a small rustling sound from the bushes and glanced back over my shoulder. Nothing moved, but my heart suddenly leapt into a frantic pace. I turned and hurried up the path, the boy following me closely.

When we reached the top of the bank, I gratefully stepped out from the dim shadows of the trees and into the reassuring sunlight at the top of the hill. The boy moved past me and continued on, carrying my wrecked bike seemingly without effort. I had expected him to set the bike down and walk it as soon as we were on level ground, but he didn’t even break his stride as we walked the short distance to his car.

So ... why had he been walking by the river if his car was right here?

My thoughts derailed when I saw the car: a shiny black convertible with the top up. I glanced at the insignia: a crown with what appeared to be a trident behind it. I wasn’t what you would call well-versed in car models, but I was reasonably certain I had never been this close to a car like that before.

Very nice, but a little too small to fit my bike into.

The boy set my bike down by the curb, walked past me, and opened the passenger door. The car was so low, the door barely cleared the curb. The boy stood, holding the door open and watching me expectantly. I hesitated. I studied the boy, trying to decide if he was some kind of lunatic or if I could trust him. I pictured myself sitting in the car with him—to see if it would be all right. No ‘little voice’ warnings popped up, but my pulse quickened and it became difficult to draw a steady breath.

I mean, even if I *had* seen the guy in chemistry class that morning, what was I thinking? Get into a car with a stranger? But then ... if he had wanted to hurt me he would have done that down by the river ...

The boy stood, still holding the door for me. Impatience flashed across his face but quickly turned to confusion as he watched me.

What about this does he not get?

I swallowed and took a steadying breath. “Thanks for your help,” I began, “but it’s really not necessary for you to take me home. I can manage.” Even *I* could hear the lack of conviction in my tone.

The boy frowned at me, his brows drawing together in disapproval.

“After a fall like that? I think it is entirely necessary for me to see you home safely,” he said in a tightly controlled tone.

I rallied, took another deep breath, and tried again. “Okay,” I said with forced resolve, “I’m very grateful for your help, but here’s my thing: I don’t actually know you,” I blurted out.

Surprised understanding lit the boy’s face.

“Oh, I see. Yes. I can understand the difficulty with that.” He studied the ground for a moment. He left the car door ajar and walked the three steps to where I stood. “My name is Ethan,” he said, glancing down at his hand before offering it to me. He reached forward uncertainly, watching my face intently.

“Elly,” I responded, taking his hand and keeping a close eye on him as I did. A mild jolt shot up my arm when his hand closed around mine. I looked down at our clasped hands and then up at Ethan.

I saw Ethan stiffen, surprised confusion colouring his features as his eyes darted from our locked hands to my face and back again. He paused for a fraction of a second longer as a warm tingle slowly crept up my arm. He abruptly let go of my hand. He opened his mouth to say something, but closed it instead, his eyes moving back toward the path we had just come up. I followed his gaze, my mind filling with the noise I had heard earlier, and my heart lurching into a fast pace. Ethan turned back to me, an impatient frown capturing his brow.

“Look,” I said, hurriedly, casting a quick glance at the brush. “Why don’t I call my sister and let her know you’ll be driving me home?”

“Right,” Ethan replied, nodding eagerly. “You make your call. I’ll get your bike in the car.”

I regarded the car dubiously then turned the same expression on Ethan. I shook my head doubtfully.

“I really don’t think my bike will fit in that car.”

“I’ll make it work,” Ethan said with a sardonic tone. “Call your sister,” he directed, moving past me and heading toward the bike.

I threw him another skeptical look then turned to dig my phone out of my backpack. The

contents were no longer where I had left them and it took me a moment to locate my phone.

At the very bottom—of course!

I lowered myself into the passenger's seat of the car, tossing my bag onto the floor and dialing the phone at the same time. I heard the harsh electronic ring on the other end of the line as I pulled the car door closed. Four rings then it went to voice mail. Maybe that was a good thing ...

I left a brief message, explaining as little as possible, and hung up before Jess could pick up. The driver's door opened just then and Ethan slid into the seat beside me. He reached for a pair of sunglasses lying on the dash in front of him and put them on, tossing the case back onto the dashboard then turning the key in the ignition.

It hit me as soon as he closed the door: the smell of a cool breeze over a clear stream or maybe it was that green smell after a spring rain. Whichever it was, it permeated the warm interior of the car, filling my head.

I cast Ethan a surreptitious glance out of the corner of my eye. I saw him sit up in his seat, his face turning toward me just a little. He contemplated the steering wheel rather seriously for a moment then made a slight face and pressed a button on the dashboard, lowering the top of the car. He rolled down the windows too. Disappointment seized me as the scent in the car quickly dissipated. Well, I consoled myself, at least my head was a little clearer this way.

Ethan took one last look at the riverbank and decisively pulled the car away from the curb and out into traffic. As we began to drive, the wind caught my hair sending its coffee-coloured length twisting across my face and obscuring my view.

Oh yes, very smooth.

I quickly gathered my reckless curls together, pulling the length of waves forward over my shoulder and trying unsuccessfully to tame my wildly flailing hair. Ethan turned to appraise me with azure blue eyes. He leaned over, reaching down under my knee to the front of my seat. I quickly leaned away from him. I felt my seat slide forward until I was quite close to the dash. It was as if someone had turned off a giant fan—the wind had suddenly stopped.

Clever.

"Thanks," I said in a somewhat surprised tone. I cautiously released my hair from the death grip I held it in, grateful when it stayed where I left it. "I really appreciate all your help," I added, looking over at Ethan. "I feel badly making you go out of your way though. I hope you're not needing to be anywhere."

He glanced at me then turned his attention back to driving.

"Don't mention it," he said lightly. "My schedule is fairly open this afternoon." I didn't miss the way one corner of his mouth turned up when he said that. He grinned over at me then and straightened his face.

I sat, silent and uncomfortable as we drove, grasping for something—anything—to say. "I, um, I think I saw you in my chemistry class this morning," I offered, desperate to break the silence. I immediately recoiled inside and made a face.

Strike one. Or is that two?

Maybe he hadn't heard me. I peered over at Ethan. Despite his perfect posture, I saw his jaw rise a centimetre. His face remained composed, as he fixed his attention on the traffic ahead of us.

“It’s possible,” he answered with only the slightest hesitation. “I’m sitting in on a few classes this term.”

So ... he’s here for the term then.

I quickly pushed aside the feeling of anticipation that thought carried with it, thinking instead about this morning’s chemistry class. Any other day I likely wouldn’t have seen him, but being the first day of classes, the lecture had ended early, and I had a few extra minutes to scan the room while I collected my things. I had stood, watching the other students as I shoved my notes into my backpack, getting a read on the general atmosphere of the class. Some of the other students spoke in hushed, anxious tones—first years likely. Others were talking excitedly to their friends about what they had done over the summer. I sighed at that and turned to close my backpack.

Wait!

My head snapped up again. My thoughts—whatever they were or were about to be—vanished. Suddenly everything went silent as my breath caught in my throat. A boy sat a few rows back. Not just any boy. This boy had short black hair neatly combed back from his face with a few wisps escaping to hang rakishly across one eye. His features were straight and fine, with a perfectly balanced mouth. The T-shirt he wore under his open shirt hinted at a lean figure and the short sleeves revealed the curves of solid biceps. I could see his eyes from where I stood. They were deep cerulean blue with a generous shading of green.

I stared blatantly, ignoring that voice that told me I was being rude. The boy sat, leaning back in his desk, one leg stretched out in front of him and one arm slung over the desk while he watched the other students, scrutinizing each face one by one as they filed out of class. None of the other students looked at him, though—not a glance.

The boy stood suddenly, waited for a girl to pass by, then stepped out into the aisle and descended the stairs. I quickly turned, pretending to collect my things. I couldn’t resist another glimpse as he went by. My timing was off, and he chose that moment to look over at me. Our eyes locked, and I jumped guiltily. I saw surprise flicker across his features as he stiffened. His brows drew together, one corner of his mouth turning down as his eyes darkened to a deeper shade of blue. I turned quickly and began shoving my notes into my backpack as he continued past me and out of class. When I was fairly certain the boy was gone, I left the classroom, keeping my eyes lowered and my glances to myself. I was forced to pay more attention to where I was going when I almost ran into a boy headed toward me on the wrong side of the hallway.

“So ... ,” Ethan prompted from his side of the car, bringing me abruptly back to the present. “You saw me in class?” He continued to focus on the traffic, his expression unreadable.

“Um, yeah, I think so,” I hedged. “Chemistry? First thing this morning, right? You were sitting a couple of rows behind me.” I cringed inwardly as the words came out of my mouth.

“Yes, I am in that class. I’ll have to pay more attention,” he said, and turned to grin at me. I couldn’t be certain but my mouth might have fallen open at the sight of him. I knew I ought to at least smile at his joke, and hopefully I did. Hopefully I responded in *some* fashion but even now I’m not sure I had.

We were close to my apartment building by the time I pulled my expression together, driving quickly down a street that turned rather abruptly to the left. Ethan didn’t slow down as he negotiated the turn—evidently one didn’t need to slow for turns in this sort of car. From the corner of my eye I saw his sunglasses case slide along the dashboard as we turned the corner—

heading right for my open window.

Major design flaw!

My hand shot out in the same instant I realized what was happening and caught the case in mid air just as it was launched out the side of the car. Honestly, it took me a moment to realize I even had the case in my hand. I thought it had gone out the window. I quickly pulled both the case and my hand back into the vehicle and immediately looked over at Ethan. His eyes darted to the case in my hand just before he fixed a guarded expression on me. I winced.

Strike two. Or maybe I'm already out?

Ethan turned his attention back to driving then, pulling up to the curb in front of my apartment. He wore a reserved expression as he parked the car and took off his glasses. He turned to me then, and I realized the case was still in my hand. I handed it to him and looked away, nervously tucking a strand of hair behind my ear.

“Nice catch. Thank you,” he said.

I gave him a half-hearted smile. He regarded me speculatively, his eyes narrowing. I watched his eyes for a moment, fascinated, as they turned the dark blue of a stormy sea.

I took a breath, deciding to try to salvage things as best I could on the off chance he wasn't totally weirded out—yet.

“The least I could do,” I responded lightly.

He only continued to watch me, nodding. Ethan opened his door then and went around to the back of the car.

Guess that would be strike three then.

By the time I had managed to extricate my backpack and myself from the low passenger's seat, Ethan had my bike out of the trunk and on the sidewalk.

“Thanks again for all of your help today,” I said, taking the bike from him. “Let me know if I can return the favour.”

One corner of his mouth twitched up slightly, and he looked away for a moment. Turning back to me he said sincerely, “No problem. I was glad to help.” He took a step toward his car then paused, and with a tone suggesting another meaning entirely, added, “I guess I'll see you in class.” He turned a wry smile on me. He gave his head a shake as he got in his car and drove away.

Yep, definitely out.

I frowned and stood watching his car disappear down the street, replaying his parting remark and feeling somewhat distracted by the smooth texture of his voice as it wafted through my head. I made a face as I stood trying to decide what he had meant. His sea-blue eyes flashed to mind. I shook my head to dislodge the thought, sighed heavily and turned to the task of locking up my bike.

I began to walk my bike to the rack outside our apartment building, and stopped short. The front rim was straight. I held up the front of the bike and gave the wheel a spin, peering along the top of it. The tire remained flat, but the wheel spun smooth and straight. My brow creased, and I looked down the street to where Ethan's car had long since disappeared around the corner.

How the heck had he managed that while I was getting out of the car?

Maybe I hit my head harder than I thought. I stood lost in my confusion for several minutes,

but couldn't decipher the situation—it just didn't add up. I gave up and locked my bike in the rack, making a note to repair the tire later.

I turned my key in the lock, opened the door, and came face to face with an irate sister waving a phone at me. She had pulled her shoulder-length dark hair into her most severe ponytail, and even though I was technically taller and older than her, it didn't seem like it right at that moment. Jess was decidedly unhappy with me.

"Just what *exactly* were you thinking?" she asked incredulously, her blue eyes wide. I sighed, extricated my keys from the doorknob and pushed past her, dropping my heavy backpack on the floor.

"Stop freaking out," I said as I made my way to the fridge for a glass of water. "Nothing happened. Besides, how was I supposed to get home?"

"You were *supposed* to call someone you *know*," she replied angrily.

"I *do* know him—sort of," I hedged. Jess only arched an eyebrow at me and stood silently. "He's in one of my classes," I attempted unconvincingly.

"We've had exactly one day of classes, Elly," she said flatly as she glared at me. "Do you remember the bus incident?" Jess asked, censure filling her tone. I frowned and kept my eyes fixed on my glass of water. Jess continued, "I remember the bus incident."

I set my glass down on the counter with a little more force than necessary.

"I told you before, Jess, I just lost track of time."

"Honestly Elly, I don't know what you're thinking sometimes," she scolded. "It's like you're from another planet. This guy could be some sort of stalker for all you know."

I rolled my eyes at her.

"I'm quite certain you don't have to worry about him stalking me," I said emphatically as I picked up my bag, set it on the table, and pulled out the remains of my lunch. I looked down at my backpack rather than at Jess. "In fact," I added resentfully, "I'm reasonably certain he won't be talking to me again after today." I looked at Jess then and saw her features soften—well, a little anyway.

"Too many sideshow antics?" she sighed.

"Pretty much," I said dejectedly, frowning down at my backpack. I stopped pulling things out of my bag and glanced at Jess. "Look, I just *knew* everything would be all right."

"You just *knew*?" Jess asked, her brows drawing together in confusion. "What does that mean? You always say that when you do stupid things."

"Yeah, but if you think about it, those 'stupid things' always work out. I know they will before I do them so it's not really stupid, it's actually just doing the things that will work."

Jess fixed a deadpan expression on me. "That doesn't make any sense," she finally said. "I still don't understand why you would let some guy drive you home."

Because he wasn't just 'some guy'.

I shrugged, shaking my head. "I don't know, Jess," I said in exasperation. "Fine," I continued irritably, "chalk it up to some innate knowledge if you want. Or maybe I have a high risk tolerance. Maybe I have no common sense. Maybe I *am* from another planet. Maybe all of the above. I just *knew*, and it *worked*, okay?"

Jess was silent for a moment, studying me with an unreadable expression. "All right," she said in her patented *have-it-your-way* tone. "Just don't do it again."

I looked at her but didn't respond. I picked up my backpack and went to my room to study.

Jess was still mad when I left for my shift at the restaurant. I chose to ignore her. I was still

certain that accepting the ride had been the correct thing to do (my mind kept flashing to the sounds in the bushes). There were some things Jess simply didn't understand. Besides, nothing had happened. Had it?

Work was a problem. I had the busy dinner rush. The evening was chaotic, and after the events of the afternoon, I wasn't in my best form. Thoughts of Ethan swirled endlessly through my head, mixed with flashes of my ignominious bike incident. I recoiled inwardly each time a stray thought surfaced. At one point I almost dropped a plate of food. I managed to check its fall just before it reached the floor, not spilling a morsel. I did a quick survey of the area, relieved to find that, with everyone so busy, no one had noticed my little parlour trick. I tried to pay more attention to both my actions and my customers, but it was difficult.

On my break, I pulled my book out of my bag, trying to distract myself from the chaos around me and collect myself somewhat. I wasn't entirely successful. A co-worker fell into the chair across from me pulling a thick sandwich out of her bag.

"Whatcha readin'?" she asked as she unwrapped the sandwich, the loud crinkle of the wrap echoing in the previously quiet room. I sighed to myself.

"*Babette's Feast* by Karen Blixen," I answered reluctantly.

Wait for it.

"Ne'er 'eard of it. 'At's i' 'bout?" she mumbled around a large bite of sandwich.

"It's a 1953 short story about a French chef stranded in a small town," I responded.

The girl laughed but it came out more like a snort.

"What are you reading *that* for? Just for fun?" she grinned.

And there it is.

"I think I should get back to work now," I said in a clipped tone. I shoved my book back into my bag and left the table.

The evening finally ended, but not before a rather energetic child spilled chocolate milk down the front of my uniform, creating a Rorschach stain for the other patrons to interpret as they would.

Chapter 2: Ethan

I took a long, hot shower that evening, trying to calm my jangled nerves and loosen the ache building in my shoulder and knee. I went to bed, Ethan's parting comment circling in my head as I tried not to think about the park incident. I lay down, tired, but sleep did not rise up to meet me. I rolled onto my side, trying to get comfortable, my pillow feeling lumpy, and the mattress refusing to comply with my body. Unease jostled my stomach and tightened my chest. As I turned restlessly back and forth between the waking and sleeping worlds, I heard leaves rustling and felt branches scratch my cheek. I felt the ground give way beneath me with the sudden pull of gravity upending my stomach, and I heard the rush of water blurring past my ears. I felt the jolt of Ethan's hand on mine, and above all these things, like a steady whine in the background, I heard the clang of metal and the snarl of unseen creatures.

Thrown in amongst these sounds and images was a tall, flowing shadow weaving through the trees, blending at times to become one with the darkness. The shadow loomed nearer as the growling grew louder. I watched the shadow, straining to see it more clearly, but every time it drew closer, an overwhelming *déjà vu* would engulf me, sweeping me further away and sending my senses spinning. My thoughts became a tangle of images wrapped in intangible sensations of assurance and dread, right and wrong, hope and despair.

At some point, the roar of the river blended with the growling, becoming a tinny clash of noise that scraped along my nerves and made my teeth ache. My mind searched the darkness, trying to see the source of the sound only to find my eyes were still closed. Opening them was definitely not on my list of priorities at the moment. Instead, I reached toward the sound, my fingers coming in contact with the radio alarm on my bedside stand. I fumbled along the top of it until I felt the three raised dots on the snooze button and pressed down hard, letting my arm drop over the side of the bed.

It seemed only a second later Jess' sharp tone pulled me reluctantly from the darkness. I felt a hand on my shoulder followed by a painful protest as Jess shook me awake. The pain shot from my shoulder into my head, waking my numbed brain with a jolt. I groaned.

"Elly, are you coming with me or not?" Jess demanded impatiently as she shook me again. With no small amount of effort I rolled over and opened my eyes. Jess stood over me with an irritated frown on her face.

"I *told* you to get to bed last night," she admonished. "We're going to be late."

I rolled back onto my stomach with a moan. I felt another shove and another protest from my shoulder.

"Elly," Jess demanded, "get up or we'll be late for class!"

"Just a few more minutes," I mumbled into my pillow. I felt weights behind my eyes pulling my eyelids down again.

"Elly wake up!" Jess ordered.

I rolled over, and swung my feet to the floor achieving a fair imitation of a sitting position. I yawned as I looked up at Jess. Jess loomed over me, her hands on her hips and her eyes narrowed.

“Didn’t you sleep well?” she asked suspiciously. She studied my face as she waited for my answer.

“No,” I said thickly. I cleared my throat.

“Was it one of your bad nights?” Jess asked warily.

“Yeah.”

“Why? What’s happening?” she asked, a hint of worry underlying the irritation in her tone.

“I don’t know,” I answered dully. Jess cast me a sideways glance.

“I need to know what’s coming,” Jess said. “Tell me as soon as you figure it out.” I turned down one corner of my mouth and nodded. “Hurry up or we’ll be late,” she directed, turning to leave. I checked the clock.

Shoot!

“Jess,” I called after her, “why don’t you get going? I don’t want to make you late too.” Jess stopped and turned, a calculating expression on her features.

“Are you sure you can manage?”

I rolled my eyes at her.

“I’m sure, Jess,” I said, vexation colouring my tone as I shook my head.

How old does she think I am anyway?

Jess hesitated, considering me, a frown pulling her eyebrows together. “All right,” she said with some uncertainty. “I’ll be home after work. Don’t make me anything for supper, I’ll grab something before I leave work.” Jess turned and walked out of my room. I immediately lay back down, reaching over and picking up my cell phone from the bedside table at the same time. I waited.

Three, two, one ...

Jess popped her head back in the door reciting her usual parting instructions: “Don’t forget your keys and your ...”

“Have it,” I said flatly, holding up the cell phone for Jess to see. Jess scowled at me before she disappeared from the doorframe. I smiled to myself.

I lay back in bed hearing keys jangling and locks turning as Jess grabbed her things and rushed out the door. With a sigh I sat up, feeling more tired now than when I had gone to bed. I stood, swayed once, then made my way to the bathroom to brush my teeth and wash my face. I studied my reflection in the mirror and frowned at the injection of red surrounding the variegated copper and brown tones of my eyes. I rubbed at the gritty feeling behind my eyelids but couldn’t quite soothe it. I gathered my tangle of curls, securing them into a ponytail—that would at least keep them contained for the day.

Hurrying to Jess’ room, I rummaged through her drawers in search of the t-shirt I wanted. Jess had lucked out on the body genes, having a nicely balanced figure. However, my more “string-bean” figure (as my mother was fond of calling it) meant that I could generally fit into any of her clothing—a situation I took full advantage of.

I moved quickly, simultaneously collecting my things (and Jess’ helmet), stuffing them in my backpack, and pulling on my shoes and jacket. I glanced into the kitchen but eschewed breakfast in favour of getting to my first class on time. Slingsing my bag onto my back, I rushed out the door, turning my face toward the warming sun, and breathing in the smooth air of the cool morning.

I reached my bike and unlocked it. Jess had exercised her mothering instincts yesterday by

fixing the flat tire for me while I was at work. The bike had definitely seen better days. It was starting to rust in places and the chain needed work ... and the brakes ... and the gear shifters. Well, okay, the whole thing was one season shy of the dump. Likely I didn't even need to put a lock on it. Hanging a "Free Bike" sign on it would probably have the same effect—it would remain in the bike rack.

I arrived at campus and locked up my bike, a slight ache fogging my head. I checked my watch, my brows drawing together in confusion: I was fifteen minutes early for class!

Typical.

I rolled my eyes, giving my head a self-deprecating shake and made my way to the Physics building and my first class of the day. There were a few people walking slowly to their classes, most of them with the ubiquitous coffee cup in hand. I scanned the path ahead and suddenly every fibre in my body seized. Walking toward me a short distance away, was a figure clad in a long, dark greatcoat reaching down to tall boots—the same figure I had seen in the park. Here, in the pale, early morning light, I could see his tall, thin build and short flaxen hair balanced by a strong jaw. He was younger than I would have assumed and he watched me intently as he walked toward me, hands shoved into the pockets of his coat.

My heart set off at a rapid pace, and I looked around frantically, not knowing just exactly what it was I needed to do. I searched for the nearest entrance into a building—any building. The main door of the Geology building was to my right, and I thought I might just make it there before the boy reached me. I rushed for the door at something just short of a run, my heart pounding in my ears. I glanced back over my shoulder. The boy was nowhere to be seen. I scanned the area, but he was gone. Had he moved past already? I turned in a half-circle, looking all around. No one was nearby.

What? The guy just disappeared off the face of the earth?

I was suddenly engulfed in the same heavy sensation of déjà vu I had felt in the park. I stood, seeing myself turn, trying to find someone who was not there. I moved as if in an echo, watching myself, my own movements out of sync with the picture in my head. The sensation stopped just as quickly as it had begun, and I was released from the grip of the moment. I was left feeling unsteady, my head spinning.

The reeling stopped after a bit, but my stomach tightened and my heart lurched. I quickly pulled the door open and hurried inside. I stopped just inside the building and looked around warily, but saw only non-descript students carrying coffee cups and backpacks. I turned and headed down the hall connecting the Geology building to the Physics building, taking one last look behind me as I went.

I arrived at my class, found a seat off to the side of the room, and sat down. I scanned the classroom for the blond boy, but didn't see him. I took a steadying breath, trying to slow my still-racing heart and calm my trembling hands as I pulled out paper and pen.

The class was crowded, being a first-year course, so I didn't have the luxury of sitting by myself. A boy with copper brillo pad hair and freckles sat down beside me, smiling politely. I gave him a perfunctory smile before turning back to my notes. The boy settled into his seat, then turned to me.

"Excuse me, but do you know if the notes for this class have been posted yet?"

"Yeah, they're up," I said, jerking my chin to the student sitting in front of us. Her laptop was open and she was scrolling through the class notes on the screen. I turned back to my notes.

"Oh, good. I'll print them off later." The boy continued, oblivious to my lack of interest in

the conversation. “I’m still trying to get organized. How are classes shaping up for you?”

I sighed inwardly, vacillating.

Let’s just chalk up another train wreck of a conversation, shall we?

“Fine, I think,” I finally responded. “The workload seems manageable so far.” (It wasn’t—at all.) I considered the boy for a moment, tilted my head to one side and started in decisively. “I finished a couple university courses in high school so I’m mostly in third year this term. I kind of know what I’m in for.” He didn’t flinch. Maybe he hadn’t heard me. “I’ve read the text. Completely. Twice,” I added. Still nothing. He just sat, smiling at me.

Huh.

“Well, being in second year doesn’t seem to be helping me,” he said with a congenial grin. “What are you taking?”

“Biochemical engineering.”

He didn’t bat an eye. He only nodded.

“I’m trying my hand at physics—might consider engineering. By the way, my name’s Sean,” he said with an affable smile, offering me his hand. I tentatively reached for Sean’s hand.

“Elly,” I said.

If Sean had been listening he would have heard the confusion in my tone, but Sean only smiled in response, shaking my hand. The conversation stopped there as the instructor walked into the room and called the class to attention.

The class was well underway, and I was fully engrossed in taking notes when the classroom door opened. There was a slight pause in the lecture as everyone turned to see who had entered. I looked up to see why the lecture had stopped. My chest immediately tightened, my lungs refusing to draw in air when I saw Ethan step into the class.

Without breaking stride, Ethan cast the frowning instructor an apologetic smile, and walked directly to the empty seat next to mine. My heart started racing double time when he sat down beside me, his smile somehow not quite reaching his stormy blue eyes. I remembered to breathe again after a few seconds only to find that same fresh, clean scent filling my senses and settling somewhere in the back of my mind.

Ethan pulled out some paper from a waxed cotton satchel then continued searching the bag. I quickly grabbed a pen from my backpack and held it out to him. Ethan considered the pen, then lifted his cobalt eyes to mine, his brows drawing together. He nodded a “thank you” and took the pen, turning his attention to the lecture.

The fact that Ethan was sitting beside me made paying attention to the lecture difficult to say the least. I glanced at him out the corner of my eye once or twice. Well, okay, maybe more than that. He sat forward in his desk, one booted foot planted firmly in front of him, the other tucked under his desk as if he might bolt out of his seat at any moment. He surveyed the other students with a wary gaze, pen in hand and notes unattended.

I forced my attention back to my notes and tried to focus on the lecture. My pulse slowed only minimally throughout the entire class, skipping a beat occasionally when my concentration lapsed and my mind drifted back to Ethan. At one point I cast him a surreptitious glance only to find him watching me take notes, a frown marring his perfect features. For the first time that class, Ethan turned his attention to the material being presented, looking between the professor and my notes.

Not good.

Class ended with a reading assignment covering the first ten chapters of the text.

“Well, that could have been worse,” Sean said, looking over at me with his ever-present smile. “At least he kept the reading assignment reasonable,” he said with a sarcastic chuckle. He sat, watching me expectantly, still grinning.

“Um, yeah . . . it wasn’t too bad,” I agreed absently. I could feel Ethan’s gaze on me like the heat of a laser boring a hole in the back of my skull.

“I don’t know about those problems, through,” Sean prattled on. “Guess we’ll have a chance to check them over in the lab.” I nodded, only too aware that Ethan sat, unmoving, in his seat. My stomach tightened making it difficult to breathe. “What lab are you in?” Sean persisted.

“Umm . . .” I parked the question in the back of my mind as I listened for movement from behind me. Nothing. I turned back to the conversation and quickly moved Sean’s question forward again.

“This afternoon,” I finally answered.

“Hey, so am I,” Sean said, his face lighting up. “I’ll see you there.” He threw me a wide smile.

I only nodded and began gathering my things, not wanting to encourage further conversation. I sucked in a relieved breath when Sean finally turned to go. I might have felt badly about that—if I had taken the time to think about it. I turned to see Ethan still in his seat. He held up my pen.

“Thank you,” he said, watching me intently through cerulean eyes.

“No problem.” I made no move to take back the pen. “You might as well keep it for your next class.”

“Again, thank you,” he said, inclining his head in my direction. “Unfortunately, I missed the first part of the lecture. I was wondering if I could impose on you by asking to borrow your notes?”

I’d rather die first.

My muscles tensed, and I forced myself to inhale. Ethan and I exchanged measuring glances. When I didn’t answer, he gave me a calculated smile, continuing to hold my gaze.

“Sure,” I finally said, trying to smile while taking my notes out of my clipboard, hoping he didn’t hear the reluctance in my voice.

“Thank you. I’ll have them copied and back to you today. Did I hear you say you were in today’s lab?”

“Yeah, this afternoon.”

“Perfect, so am I. I’ll return them when I see you in lab.” He flashed a brief and polite smile, then stood up, watching me expectantly. I stared, fascinated, as his eyes settled into a blue-green colour. Ethan’s brows drew together slightly. “What class do you have next?” he prompted.

“Ummm . . .” I stalled, trying to pull up the information I needed as I hurried to collect my things, only too aware of Ethan waiting. I stuffed my clipboard into my bag. “Biochem,” I said triumphantly, having finally dredged up the information from underneath my scattered thoughts.

I stood up and Ethan motioned for me to precede him out of class. We walked out of the building, Ethan barely stopping at the bottom of the front steps.

“I’ll see you later,” he said, and quickly strode off. I watched him walk away, taking in his poised, confident gait. My mind flashed to an image of him reading my notes, and I recoiled inside.

Definitely a foul ball ...

I made my way to my next class—another biochemistry course—and found a seat well away from the other students. This was a third-year course with a heavy workload so I had to focus a little more here. I was writing frantically, trying to keep up with my notes, when a movement in the open door of the classroom drew my attention. I looked up to see a tall figure clad in a long coat and boots. I drew in a sharp breath and my muscles solidified, becoming one with the desk I sat in. I searched out the nearest exit.

Having spotted another door on the other side of the room, my attention turned back to the blond boy, my heart floundering against my ribs. I watched closely as he moved to the front of the class. He took a few uneven steps forward, favouring his right foot. He stood, weight on his left foot, surveying the students with a stern expression in his pale grey eyes.

I looked at the instructor and then at the students around me. No one was paying the slightest attention to the boy. He limped over to the side of the classroom and continued to scan the faces of the people in the desks.

Am I the only one seeing this?

I watched the boy. Suddenly his spectral eyes met mine and he stiffened, lifting his chin. My stomach turned. The boy tilted his head slightly to one side, a curious look on his face. I tore my eyes away from the intensity of his gaze, studying the papers on my desk and listening to the steady buzz of the instructor as he droned on.

Without lifting my head, I watched the boy out of the corner of my eye. He wove through the rows and between occupied seats, and yet no one looked up from their notes or even turned their head as the boy moved uncomfortably close to them. He slowly picked his way to an empty desk at the side of the room and half-fell into the seat. He glanced over at me once more, then turned away, frowning.

I pretended to go back to taking notes, my heart settling into an uneven rhythm. At one point I glanced at the boy and found him sitting, unmoving, watching the door of the classroom. His leather coat was cracked with long wear and buttoned almost to the top. His boots were dull with dust and stains—from what I wouldn't dare hazard a guess. The boy sat now, leaning his head and shoulder against the wall with his right arm resting on top of the desk. His face was pale as he closed his eyes momentarily and winced. I watched as he took a deep breath and clenched his jaw.

He lifted his head and turned in my direction. At first he looked past me, but then his cool grey eyes flickered to meet mine. I didn't think to turn away, locked in the intensity of his gaze. He smiled a weak, resigned smile as he shook his head lightly. He looked away again, leaning his head back against the wall, and continued to watch the door of the classroom.

I couldn't help glancing over at the boy occasionally during the lecture. He didn't move for the remainder of the class and I might have assumed he had fallen asleep, only his eyes remained fixed on the open doorway. He didn't even move when the students around him began filing out of class. I watched him curiously as the rows emptied of students. When his entire row was empty, he stood up to leave. He moved reticently, his right arm held tightly to his side. He turned, and stared past me again.

I quickly redirected my gaze and began stuffing my things into my backpack. The blond boy limped slowly out of the room, waiting for a student to pass him before going through the door.

I doubt he's here to learn Biochemistry.

I stood, slung my backpack over my shoulder, and walked out of the room. My mind flashed back to my restless night and I exhaled sharply. I looked around for the boy when I got outside the class, relieved when I didn't see him.

The first lab of my afternoon was like the thing that wouldn't end. We were reviewing lab techniques in preparation for next week's experiment. The material was a repeat of last year's first lab, which was fortunate in a way since other thoughts were competing for my attention. Images of the blond boy insinuated themselves in my mind, disquieting my stomach.

I was also thinking about Ethan reading my notes. I grimaced. I had been working on a complicated formula during that class in addition to taking notes from the lecture. Now I sat, trying to call to mind exactly what I had scribbled in the margins of my notes. While a slip up like that was not likely to be the final nail in the coffin, it would certainly help keep the lid down. Unfortunately, my uncooperative brain would not relinquish the information I needed. I sighed and forced my attention to the instructor.

Honestly, how long can one class take anyway?

The lab finally concluded, and I hurried to my physics lab. I entered the class, my gaze darting around in search of Ethan. He wasn't there. I made my way to an empty workbench and slid onto the cold, metal stool set alongside it. I tried to busy myself with pulling out paper and pen, but my eyes strayed to the door every few seconds.

When Ethan stepped into the lab, my stomach did a neat somersault and my heart picked up pace. I watched him as he surveyed the room for a moment, his eyes narrowed as he scrutinized each person in it.

I waited for him to see me, wondering what I would do when he did. I was so intent on watching Ethan, I didn't notice Sean come up beside me. If the truth were told, I hadn't even seen him enter the room. Suddenly he was standing in front of me, blocking my view of Ethan. I was forced to look up at him.

"Hey Elly, have a lab partner yet?" he asked, hope ringing in the words.

I felt a momentary panic. I tried to peer around Sean to where I knew Ethan stood, but couldn't do that without actually getting off the stool and stepping around him. My shoulders slumped and I sank onto the stool. I sighed.

"No, I don't have a partner yet," I admitted reluctantly.

"Wanna partner up then?" Sean asked brightly.

No.

"Sure," I said, trying unsuccessfully to rein in the disappointment infusing my words.

"Great," Sean said, smiling. He slid past me between the two lab tables, sat down on the other stool at the end of the bench, and began pulling out his workbook.

Ethan walked up to our lab table then. He cast Sean a cursory glance, his eyes narrowing and turning a darker shade of blue. Ethan turned to me and rearranged his features into a polite smile.

"Hello," he said.

I looked up at him, watching his eyes lighten a shade, and sending butterflies careening around in my stomach. My heart hammered as I stared at him. Fortunately, he didn't wait for me to say anything or we might have been there a while.

"Thank you for the use of your notes," he said in a polite tone as he set the papers down on the table in front of me. "I found them very ... *helpful*," he said archly. He paused and his brow drew down speculatively as he studied me for a second. He tilted his head to one side,

scrutinizing my features. “I was particularly interested in your comments on time dilation and relativity of simultaneity with regard to Einstein’s theory of relativity.”

Oh, so busted.

I almost laughed—almost. Ethan was sober, his gaze fixed on me. I quickly dropped my eyes to my traitorous notes, working hard to pull in a breath. My heart beat out a quick tempo. I was afraid to look at him—afraid I would see *that* expression on his face. My brain frantically dug through trite sayings and glib retorts, trying to find a response, but came up blank.

Fine, if that’s the way this has to be, just get it over with.

I squared my shoulders and raised my head, locking his gaze in mine. I faltered. I was expecting to see *that* look on his face—the teasing smile—but Ethan didn’t seem to be enjoying my discomfort. He simply appeared curious, and I saw only expectation in his blue-green eyes.

I have no response to that.

“Umm ... ,” I stalled, having no precedent to fall back on. “You’re welcome?” I glanced down at the pile of papers in front of me, my brow furrowing. I picked up the notes from the desk, shoving them quickly back into my stack.

Stupid notes.

Ethan hadn’t moved. What more was there after that statement? Done. The end. Good-bye. And yet he still stood beside me—waiting. I looked up at him hesitantly.

“I was wondering,” he said, his expression unreadable, “if perhaps you might explain some of the concepts to me?”

I’m sorry, I need a ruling on that one.

“I ... beg your pardon?” I stammered.

Ethan’s brows drew together. He glanced at the floor then lifted his eyes to mine again, his frown deepening. “I asked if you would explain the concepts to me,” he repeated slowly and carefully.

“Um ... sure” The lab assistant entered the room just then, bringing the class to attention. Ethan looked over at the assistant then back at me.

“Perhaps after the lab?” he suggested. I could only nod. Ethan shook his head and grinned. He went to sit down at the table behind mine.

Sean and I exchanged a perplexed glance then turned our attention to the instructor. The lab was brief with the instructor going over the expectations and marking system for the term; the actual lab work would begin next week. The class seemed to take an eternity even though it was only some basic lab instruction. In my mind, I kept running through Ethan’s comments, but no matter which way I looked at things, I couldn’t make any sense of them. Why would he ask me to explain that stuff? I was very aware of Ethan’s presence behind me. I almost turned around twice, only just catching myself each time.

The lab was finally dismissed. Sean stood up to go, saying something about seeing me next class. I hoped I had responded appropriately. I hoped I had responded at all. As soon as Sean left, Ethan slid past the back of my chair, taking Sean’s now-empty seat.

“So ... ,” he paused, studying my face intently. “Time dilation?” he prompted.

Ok ... this was something new.

I took a steadying breath. “Do you know the principle?” I asked.

“I have some knowledge of the concept, yes,” he said, smiling to himself. “What is your understanding of it?” He grinned crookedly at me.

I only stared.

Focus!

I quickly turned away. “Well, simply put, the theory explains how time moves at different speeds depending on a person’s frame of reference—how fast the person is moving or not moving. In other words, time around you moves differently depending on how fast you’re moving. It just seems to make sense, although . . . ,” I hesitated, not certain how to explain it.

“Although?” Ethan asked, leaning toward me and continuing to watch me closely.

“It just doesn’t seem *complete*,” I finally concluded. “It feels as if the theory is missing something, or doesn’t quite cover everything, but I can’t seem to figure out what it is.”

“What else would you have it explain?” he asked, tilting his head to the side and watching me closely.

I shrugged.

“It just seems there’s more to the puzzle,” I answered vaguely.

Ethan paused for a moment, studying my face uncertainly. He drew a breath then and turned away.

“Fascinating,” he said, then paused again. He looked back at me and smiled a polite smile. He stood and moved past me out into the aisle, turning back to me when he had passed.

“Thank you for the use of your notes. They are very . . . *thorough* by the way,” he said, one corner of his mouth turning up more. I frowned at him and his grin widened.

“You’re welcome,” I said with a hint of pique in my tone. I turned and started collecting my things. Ethan chuckled lightly and began walking out of the room.

Without turning around he called back, “I’ll see you in chemistry class.”

I stood and watched Ethan leave. I took a breath to calm my tangled stomach. Finally I shook my head, threw my backpack over my shoulder, and left the class.

Chapter 3: Liam

The 1983 Chevette I shared with Jess protested with a squeaky groan as I slid into the worn driver's seat. The engine took its time turning over and I considered biking to my parents' house instead. The only thing was, I didn't want to be caught out after dark again. To say the engine roared to life would be giving the thing more credit than it was due, but it did eventually fire up. I began the short drive, the car moving so slowly I might have gotten there faster by wagon train. I finally arrived at my parents' house where I found Jess in the kitchen.

"Hey Jess," I greeted her, going to stand beside her at the kitchen counter. I watched as she pulled items out of the cupboard. "Making supper?" I asked, not bothering to hide my pained expression.

"Yeah," she answered absently, measuring milk into a cup and setting it on the counter.

I made a face.

"Jess, you in the kitchen is just a generally bad idea," I stated flatly. "Can I help you?"

Jess shot me a scowl.

"I'm fine," she replied tersely. "But since you're here why don't you get a pot of water boiling?" It was a directive.

I was about to get the pot when I noticed Jess pulling out a knife and cutting board. She set them on the cupboard and I winced. My attention remained fixed on Jess as I put the pot of water on to boil. I had just turned on the element when I saw a hastily set down jar bump the knife, sending the blade toppling over the edge of the counter. The next thing I knew, I was kneeling beside Jess, knife handle securely in hand, and the point of the blade just shy of her bare foot.

Jess jumped back a step, her elbow catching the cup of milk and sending it toppling to the floor. I looked to see where it was going to land but found the cup already in my other hand, right side up, and milk neatly contained. I stood, setting the cup and the knife on the counter—far away from my clumsy sister. Jess was still trying to find the cup.

"I got it," I said.

"You know," she finally managed after locating the knife and cup in their rightful place on the counter, "this is why you have no friends."

I arched an eyebrow in response.

"You're welcome," I replied sarcastically. "You could be just a little more grateful," I admonished.

Jess snorted lightly.

"Consider it payback for all the times I rescued you on the playground. And as for the infamous train wreck you called high school—how would you ever have survived *that* without me?" she replied superiorly, boldly slicing an onion with a loud thunk of the knife on the cutting board.

I flinched when Jess mentioned high school and the word "purgatory" flashed to mind.

"I would have done just fine," I protested with some pique but much less conviction. The pungent smell of onion assaulted my nose.

“Maybe,” she answered with reservation, considering me as she stirred pasta into the heating water. “But you’d still be living with Mom and Dad. The only reason they let you move out was because I promised to look after you.”

My jaw dropped and I looked at Jess, appalled.

“I can look after myself just fine,” I objected.

Jess inclined her face to me with a deadpan expression.

“Dad threatened to nail your door shut until you were thirty,” she said flatly.

I was about to launch into what I’m certain would have been an amazing comeback when the back door opened and my wisp of a mother breezed into the kitchen, bags dropping and sweaters flying in her wake. My anchor of a father followed her in, setting the bags to rights and catching the sweaters. Jess and I stopped squabbling and turned our attention to our parents.

My mother was anxious to hear about mine and Jess’ classes and how the new school year was going for each of us. I was glad Jess was excited about her courses this year. She kept up an animated conversation requiring little input from me. My mother asked if we had met up with our old friends, possibly confusing us for sixth graders. Jess supplied them with the names of all the new people she had met in her various classes and told them of the students who had returned. Some had traveled during the summer or had taken interesting jobs.

I was grateful I could at least mention Sean and Ethan, although I was to regret mentioning Ethan quickly enough. Evidently, having friends to talk about was a rather unusual circumstance for me—or so my mother seemed to think. She launched into rather extensive questioning on the subject. After securing every scrap of information I could provide about Ethan, my mother ended with: “So he’s in a number of your classes then?”

“Yeah,” I answered with some reserve. My mother and father exchanged an uneasy look. “What?” I asked, glancing between the two of them.

“Nothing,” my father said gently. “It’s just surprising for you to make friends so easily.”

I scowled.

“Is it really so difficult to believe I have a friend?” I asked. I thought about that and frowned.

Yeah, maybe.

I turned to my father and he cast me an apologetic half-smile. He hesitated almost imperceptibly then shook his head.

“Sorry, Elly,” he said. “We’re just concerned for you. It’s our job,” he grinned. “I’m glad you’re making friends.”

I was glad when it was time to go home.

I woke up the next morning feeling just as tired as I had the day before, if not more so. I was woken by the abrasive sounds of my alarm, the tinny voices on the radio bantering about the weather. Apparently, it would be rainy today.

Great—I’ll have to take the bus.

I recoiled from the thought, and let my mind slip away into the inky fog from which it had just emerged. The thick darkness behind my eyes pulled me back to sleep until memories of my night stirred in the cloying shadows. For much of the night I had contended with a feeling of dread that gnawed at my stomach and made my head ache. Last night was worse than before though, because I had also dreamed: random scenes of a blond figure watching me, the sensation of falling, and a feeling of déjà vu that left me dizzy and disoriented. Intertwined among these

images were distant visions of Ethan. In my dreams he stood between me and the shadow as it wove among the trees, looming ever closer. And through all of the scenes, a palpable sense of foreboding crawled around in my stomach and wriggled into my chest. I forced my eyes open, letting light flood my thoughts and dispel the fog. I corralled my scattered dreams and musings, trying to focus on the day ahead.

Jess was already wolfing down a bowl of cereal when I dragged my reticent body into the kitchen. She turned to me and paused, spoon halfway to her mouth. Her eyebrows drew together.

“You look terrible. Another rough night?” She shoved the cereal into her mouth, put down the bowl, and picked up her coffee.

I cast her a scathing look.

“Thanks. And, yes,” I added irritably, “another rough night.” Much of my indignation was lost as I tried to stifle a yawn. I stared enviously at the coffee cup in Jess’ hand and wondered if it would be worth choking down the foul brew in exchange for being more awake. I could already feel the powdery bitterness at the back of my throat. Jess’ gaze moved from my face to the cup she held in her hand.

“Don’t even think about it,” she commanded, shaking her head sternly. “The last time you had coffee you were agitated and unfocused all day.”

I frowned at her.

“Some people are going for that you know,” I said as I poured myself a glass of juice and drank it in one go. Maybe sugar would help.

“Do you know what’s wrong yet?” Jess asked impatiently.

“No. Something’s coming, but I can’t get a handle on what it is. I keep dreaming of stuff from the last few days. It’s all pretty vague.” I washed the handful of dishes we had used and left them to dry on the counter.

“C’mon, Elly. Just think and figure it out—you’ve always been able to before,” Jess pressed sullenly.

Visions of the blond boy flashed through my mind. My forehead wrinkled as I considered the number of times I’d seen him in the last few days. My thoughts swirled around him like puzzle pieces twisting and turning in my mind, but no matter which way I tried, the pieces refused to fit together.

“What?” Jess asked tightly.

I looked up to meet her scrutinizing gaze.

“Nothing,” I said, shaking my head dismissively. “It’s just this guy I keep seeing around campus. I’ve seen him a few times now”

“So this isn’t Ethan we’re talking about then?”

“No,” I said, moving to collect my things and stuff them in my backpack. “This guy is blond and always wears a long coat with boots. He’s in some of my classes—I think. He sits in on them anyway.” One corner of my mouth turned down. “I see him watching me sometimes,” I added a little uneasily.

Jess snorted lightly.

“Why would anyone be watching you? That doesn’t make any sense. More likely sleep-deprived paranoia talking.” Jess frowned at me as she zipped her bag closed. The buzz of the zipper scraped against the nerves in my ears, making my teeth ache.

“Maybe,” I conceded when the noise stopped, “but I see him everywhere I go. There’s something odd about him. I never see him talking to anyone.” I paused, realizing the irony there

—I rarely spoke with anyone either. I pushed that thought aside and continued. “He avoids everyone and he never takes notes in class. He doesn’t even carry books or a backpack or anything.”

Jess paused and considered me for a moment, her eyes narrowing.

“What’s he doing on campus then?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” I said with a shrug. “Auditing classes maybe?”

“And just what are we supposed to do with *that*?” Jess asked peevisly, frustration turning her eyes a cold blue. We pulled on our jackets and backpacks.

“I’ll just have to keep an eye on him I guess,” I said, reaching up to catch the helmet Jess had knocked off the shelf just before it collided with her head. Jess ducked when she saw my hand reach up.

“I got it,” I said, replacing the helmet on the shelf. Jess frowned.

“Thanks,” she said curtly. “So what do we do?” Jess demanded.

“Jess, I don’t even know what’s going on, let alone what to do about it. I’ll let you know if I need help,” I said, noncommittally.

“You’ll let me know *when you find out what’s wrong*,” Jess corrected firmly, casting me a disapproving frown. I met Jess’ cold gaze directly and we stood, measuring one another for several seconds.

“Fine,” I conceded irritably. We both turned and left the apartment together.

The sticky air inside the bus was littered with the sludgy smells of wet clothing and damp hair. The sloppy whirring of tires on wet pavement drowned out the deafening silence of the passengers. The people sat staring sullenly at the floor of the bus. When we reached campus, I gratefully pressed my way out of the dank light and the suffocating atmosphere filling the bus.

Jess and I walked through the soft, cold rain that frustrated the light and dimmed the campus bus mall. The rain had eased somewhat, falling now in squelchy large drops and I turned my face up into it. I breathed in its cool, green scent, the crispness of the air helping to wash away the fog of my sleepless night.

I opened my eyes, taking another deep breath and turned around. I felt my heart stop, then start up double time when I saw a tall, blond figure walking away from us down the path, the hem of his great-coat slapping wetly against the top of his boots.

“Jess, there he is!” I whispered urgently.

“Who?” she asked, glancing around. She looked in the wrong direction.

“The guy I was telling you about: the blond guy that I see everywhere. He’s right over there,” I said, nodding in the direction of the blond boy.

“Where?” she said, straining in the direction I had indicated. “I don’t see a blond guy.”

I raised my brow in disbelief.

How on earth could she miss a six-foot-tall guy in a greatcoat striding through the middle of a bus mall full of students? He was walking along the edge of the path, scrutinizing the people moving past. As I watched, he stepped lightly around a group of students who hadn’t even looked up at him, let alone given him room to pass. He was moving quickly and would be around the corner in a second. I shot Jess a desperate scowl.

“What do you mean you can’t see him?” I asked tersely. “He’s right in front of the library,” I said, pointing at him as he continued to move away from us. “The guy with the long coat. He’s about to turn the corner,” I said urgently.

Jess searched through the subdued glow of the bus mall lights, turning to where I pointed.

“Sorry, Elly, I don’t see any blond guy there.”

Too late.

“Never mind, he’s gone now,” I said with a sigh. Jess shrugged apologetically. We said good-bye then, Jess cautioning me to be careful, and I hurried to physics class through the large drops of soft rain, still working on the puzzle in my head.

I rounded the corner of the library and made my way across the green space in the center of campus that students called “the Bowl”. I was almost at the Physics building when I caught sight of Ethan’s dark hair and uncompromising posture. His back was to me as he stood in front of the steps of the Physics building just off the path.

Beside Ethan stood another boy. The boy was practically a carbon copy of Ethan. He was nearly as tall as Ethan though somewhat slighter in build. His hair was almost as dark as Ethan’s, and while both wore their hair trimmed around the ears, Carbon Copy Boy wore his hair long in front. It would have covered his face if he hadn’t brushed it off to the side.

I glanced over at the other person in the small group then and stopped short, recognizing the tall, coat-clad figure. The blond boy stood talking to Ethan in low tones, watching passersby warily. I was about to step to the side of the path, hoping not to be noticed, when Carbon Copy Boy lifted his hazel eyes to mine. He paused, frowning, then turned and spoke to Ethan. Ethan’s head came up, but he didn’t turn around. He lowered his gaze instead, studying the ground and nodding. I stared, held in place by the scene playing out before me, my heart barely beating, my breathing shallow. Rainwater dropped off the hair clip at the back of my neck and trickled down my spine, making me shiver.

Ethan turned then and looked over at me. My breathing quickened and I felt an ache building in my head as my pulse pounded in my temples. I felt the colour drain from my face as the blond boy and Carbon Copy Boy strode toward me along the path. The two boys moved swiftly past me. I could only stand, watching them go by, their movements fluid and seemingly a little too fast. I felt the now-familiar sense of déjà vu wash over me as they passed, only this time it was worse. My head swam in the dizzying sensation and I shut my eyes trying to keep from stumbling forward. It didn’t work.

I felt myself sway, my backpack dropping off my shoulder to the ground beside me. I opened my eyes trying to right myself, but instead of finding my balance, I found the dizziness giving me another push and a spin. The scene around me twirled like a tilt-a-whirl. I felt the inevitable pull of gravity and put out my hands to break my fall as I tottered forward a step.

My hands hit something solid and my fall stopped before it had truly begun. I felt a firm grip on both my arms. I looked up, trying to focus through the swaying images and found a pair of steel-blue eyes staring down at me. Ethan’s face was close to mine, his breath steaming the air between us and warming my cheek. The scene spun and my head fell against his shoulder, my hands trapped against his chest as he held my weight against him. I rested my head on his shoulder, hoping the spinning would stop. From somewhere close to my ear I heard Ethan’s concerned voice.

“Elly? Are you alright? What’s wrong?”

“I think I’m okay. Just dizzy,” I mumbled against his shoulder. I didn’t move—I couldn’t be certain of my bearings yet. “I just need a minute.”

I felt Ethan relinquish his grip on my arms as he pulled the sides of his open jacket around me, securing it in place by wrapping his arms around my waist. The warmth inside his jacket drove out the chill of the rain-soaked air. We stood there for a moment, Ethan’s clear scent filling the air between us, blending with the smell of the falling rain. I could feel the steady beat of his heart under my hands as it moved in rhythm with his breathing.

After a minute the swaying and tilting under my feet settled and I cautiously lifted my head from Ethan's shoulder. I glanced around and the world seemed to remain fixed in place. I raised my face to Ethan's.

"Better?" he asked, his eyes the colour of tropical water.

Yeah, better!

"Better," I nodded, reining in my chaotic thoughts. I reluctantly stepped away from Ethan's warmth and back into the cool of the rain. He took a half step back, continuing to study my face.

"Sorry about that," I said, studying the ground. "I'm not sure what happened there."

Ethan only nodded. He looked up at the falling rain then back at me, frowning.

"We should get you inside," he said. "You're getting wet."

I nodded.

Ethan picked up my backpack from where it had landed in a puddle, a dark, wet splotch staining the bottom of it. He threw the backpack over his shoulder and gestured for me to precede him up the steps to the door. I started up the steps, feeling him fall in behind me after a moment.

Strange yet comfortably familiar.

I entered the classroom and made my way to an empty desk at the side of the room. Ethan set my backpack on the floor beside me, but didn't sit down. I turned to him to thank him for his help, but didn't get that far. Instead, I suddenly found a take-out cup being pressed into my hand. I looked down in surprise at the pleasingly warm cup now snug in my chilled hand.

"What's this?" I asked, my brow drawn in confusion.

"Tea, and a muffin," he said, holding out a brown paper bag to me. I took the bag without thinking. "I thought you might need some breakfast." I glanced between the cup of tea in my hand and Ethan's face. Ethan only studied me with an unreadable expression.

"I don't understand," I said slowly. "What makes you think I need breakfast and where did you get this?"

"Did you already eat breakfast?" Ethan asked with a raised brow.

"Well, no, I was late getting up, but"

"Then you need to eat something." Ethan sat down in the desk beside me, waiting expectantly.

I obediently opened the lid of the cup and took a sip: English breakfast tea, sugar, no cream—exactly the way I liked it. I hesitated, watching Ethan cautiously for a moment. He took a deep breath and turned away. I opened the paper bag. The tangy smell of cinnamon pressed in on my senses. I threw Ethan a sideways glance as I pulled out the muffin and took a bite.

"Apple cinnamon," I blurted, surprised. "My favourite. How did you know that?" I considered him then, an unsettled feeling growing in my stomach.

"Lucky guess," he replied with a shrug.

"I think not," I said, narrowing my eyes. I paused, hearing the rustle of a coat and the groan of a chair as someone dropped into the seat on the other side of me. I didn't turn around, my attention fixed on Ethan. "What exactly ... ," I began determinedly, but my words were cut short.

I felt a jolt against my elbow and my fingers lost track of the hot tea. I quickly moved to catch the cup. I looked down at my hand expecting, as always, to see the cup already in it, and already saying, "I've got ... ," but I never finished the sentence.

I looked at my empty hand, then scanned the floor where the tea should have landed in a

puddle—but there was nothing there. Suddenly I felt the cup sliding into my hand again and glanced up. Ethan was still holding the cup, waiting for me to grip it.

“No,” he said quietly beside me, “*I’ve got it.*” He looked past me, a frown on his face. I turned to see the uncomfortable expression on Sean’s freckled face as he watched Ethan.

“Sorry about that,” Sean said sheepishly, more to Ethan than to me. Ethan nodded soberly and sat back in his seat, turning his attention to me. I dropped my gaze to the cup in my hand then looked up at Ethan. My stomach went hollow and cold. In my mind I could see puzzle pieces spin and turn, two of them falling into place. The first: Ethan and the blond boy knew each other. The second: Ethan was as much of a freak of nature as I was. I realized I hadn’t breathed for a moment and inhaled. I took a contemplative sip of the tea. Ignoring Sean, I gave Ethan a meaningful look.

“Seems like it’s my turn to thank *you* for the nice catch,” I said, an image of his glasses case sliding across a dashboard flitting across my mind. I watched Ethan through narrowed eyes.

“You’re welcome,” Ethan said, his brow raised innocently.

Who is this guy?

I considered the muffin for a moment then decisively launched into my interrogation.

“The blond boy you were talking to outside. I think I’ve seen him in a few of my classes,” I said conversationally. I shoved a bite of muffin into my mouth before turning to Ethan expectantly.

He returned my gaze with a measuring one before answering. He turned away, shook his head, then glanced back at me.

“I believe you are referring to Liam,” Ethan replied in a slow and precise tone. “Yes, I know him.” Ethan paused, then offered: “The other person was my brother, Theo.” He studied my face as he waited for me to reply.

“Your brother?” I asked with a hint of surprise, only then recalling the Carbon-Copy Boy. “Makes sense—he looks exactly like you.”

“Does he?” Ethan asked rhetorically. “He’s in town visiting for a time.”

“So how do you know the blond b—Liam?”

“He’s someone I work with.” Ethan paused. “Actually, he’s more of a friend,” he amended.

“And he’s going to school here?” I took a sip of my tea, watching Ethan closely over the rim of the cup.

“He’s ... auditing some classes this term.”

Hmmm. Might explain things. Maybe. Some things.

“So do you have other siblings?” I asked curiously, taking a bite of my muffin. It really was good—for a lot of reasons.

“I have a younger sister as well,” Ethan replied, nodding.

“How old are they? Are they still in school?”

Ethan regarded me a moment, a thoughtful expression on his face. He shook his head.

“No, they remain home with my father. They study with tutors. We ... travel sometimes.” He hesitated, seeming to choose his words carefully then continued, his brow pulling together in concentration. “My sister is ... *two* years younger than I am and my brother is ... *four* years younger than me.”

Okay: home-schooled by tutors, travel, fancy cars. I considered Ethan’s clothes: jeans and a loose green cotton shirt with a white t-shirt underneath. The clothes seemed of good quality to be sure, but the style was conservative and classic. Knowing nothing of designer clothes myself,

I couldn't tell if they fit into that category.

Doesn't matter anyway.

"Are you from around here?" I asked, my curiosity growing with every exchange.

Ethan paused casting me a sideways glance. He looked away again. A small smile played briefly on his lips as though he were remembering something pleasant. When he spoke again, his tone was softer than before.

"No, I'm not from here," he said. "I arrived a short while ago." He turned and studied me curiously. "And you? Have you lived here long?" His eyes were an intense blue like the colour of the ocean under a summer sky.

I took a breath before answering, buying time to rein in my thoughts.

"Only my entire life," I replied with a resigned sigh and a slight frown. I finished off my muffin, scrunched up the bag in one hand, and went to work on my tea. Ethan sat up in his seat, leaning forward, his eyes keen.

"And your family? Do they live here as well? You have a sister, as I recall," he said. I nodded.

"My parents live in town. There's only my sister and me in the family. We've all lived here oh ... just about forever. My sister and I share an apartment. We both attend classes here."

Wait a minute! He just hijacked my interrogation.

I rallied and tried again. "So what work do you and Liam do?" I asked with a slightly accusatory tone.

Ethan studied me for a moment before answering.

"Contract work. Are you done with your tea?" I glanced down at the cup in my hand and found it empty. Ethan extended his hand and I handed him my cup. He held out the other one and I gave him the squished paper bag. He stood and took them to the garbage.

By the time Ethan got back to his seat, the instructor had entered the room and I was frantically pulling out notepaper. The instructor resumed his lecture from the previous day, and I hurried to keep up with my note taking.

Suddenly Ethan leaned toward me and whispered, "You wrote down the answer before he finished outlining the question." My concentration derailed, and I may have actually jumped in my seat, my eyes flashing up to meet Ethan's.

Oops.

I cast Ethan a guilty look. Ethan frowned and scanned the other students apprehensively. My eyes darted around too, but no one was watching me—no one besides Ethan. I turned back to him. Seemingly satisfied with what he saw, Ethan relaxed into his unwaveringly perfect posture and leaned his head toward me.

"How did you do that?" he asked intently.

"Lucky guess," I whispered, letting sarcasm colour my words.

"I think not," he shot back. "You should be more careful," he added firmly. He gave me a penetrating look, glanced around once more then turned his attention to the lecture.

I went back to my notes, very aware of Ethan as he kept a close eye on me. Sean leaned over to ask me about the material once or twice. So, all in all, it was next to impossible to concentrate.

Despite the tea, fatigue wore on me, making my head ache and my thinking slow. I found myself yawning by the end of class. When the lecture was finished Sean turned to me.

“Guess I’ll see you next class then,” he said with a hesitant glance at Ethan. I nodded and said I would see him then. Sean smiled and turned to go.

Ethan stood and watched the other students as they filed out of class, waiting patiently for me to pack my bag and exit the room ahead of him. Once outside the building, he turned to me. His brows drew together then as he studied my face intently.

“Did you get *any* sleep last night?”

“Excuse me?!” I asked.

“I noticed you seemed tired in class today.”

“Oh, yeah.” I wrinkled my nose. “No, I didn’t get much sleep,” I admitted. I laughed lightly. “Do I look that bad?”

Ethan smiled politely and replied with an earnest and gentle, “No.” He opened his mouth to say something then closed it again as he considered me for a moment. “Why don’t I walk you to your next class?”

“Oh,” I responded, taken off guard. “You really don’t need to do that. I’m fine, and I’m sure you have a class to get to.”

“I don’t have a class right now.” Ethan smiled politely. “May I take your bag for you?” he asked as he held out his hand.

“No, really,” I replied self-consciously, “I can manage.” I adjusted the bag to sit more squarely on my shoulder.

Ethan leveled a *no-nonsense-from-you* look at me.

“You’re tired. I insist.”

He didn’t wait for a response. He just reached for the strap. He swung the backpack off my shoulder and onto his own in a quick, fluid motion that made me take a startled step back. I hadn’t even felt any movement, only the weight of the bag lifting.

Ethan turned and began to walk toward the Chemistry building. It took me a fraction of a second to find my feet and catch up to him. I thought about objecting to the backpack thing, but he was right: I was tired, my head still ached, and the bag was heavy. I let him carry my backpack.

Biochemistry class dragged on and I had difficulty keeping up with the lecture. My thoughts were lost in a fog of fatigue and I had to keep tracking them down. They would resurface randomly and never in any semblance of order. The headache didn’t help matters much as it clawed its way to the top of my head. Thank goodness I didn’t have labs this afternoon. The class finally ended. I threw my backpack over my shoulder and headed for the bus mall, anxious to get home. I pictured myself flopping down on a very welcoming couch for a couple of hours.

Outside, the weather had turned warm and pleasant. I stopped on the top step of the building and turned my face up to the sun, closing my eyes. I inhaled the wet, green smell of damp earth and sun-drying grass. I could almost feel the rays of heat pulsing on my face, easing my tense muscles and dulling my lingering headache. I stood for a moment, enjoying the contradiction of the warm sun and the cool breeze.

I opened my eyes. I had just started down the steps when I saw Ethan standing on the grass a short way off. He was leaning casually against a tree, his hands in the pockets of his jeans, one ankle crossed over the other, and his shirt hanging open to reveal the form-fitting t-shirt underneath. I stopped abruptly. My backpack, however, continued forward, and I had to catch myself before the weight of it pulled me down the steps. I glanced up to see if Ethan had seen my klutz only to find him striding toward me.

My heart stopped momentarily, then started up double-time. My breath caught in my throat and my stomach tightened. I frowned, wondering how the sight of him could wreak such havoc with my system. What bothered me more was I couldn't tell if it was anxiety or anticipation that I felt.

I stood trying to rein in my ill-behaved systems as Ethan walked toward me. I forced my feet to move, navigating the steps more carefully this time. Ethan studied me as he neared, and I wondered at the concern I saw in his expression. When he reached me, his forehead creased.

"How are you feeling? Better?"

"Better," I lied, trying to impart some conviction to my words as my heart rate picked up. He continued to eye me doubtfully. "Honestly, I'm all right," I asserted. One corner of Ethan's mouth turned down.

"You're finished classes for the day," Ethan said. I couldn't tell if it was a question or a statement. I nodded. "Well then, I'm parked this way," he said in his usual matter-of-fact tone, indicating the path to my left.

"Okay," I said, "I'm heading to the bus mall." I gestured in the general direction of the bus mall toward the right. "Thanks for your help today. I guess I'll see you in chemistry tomorrow." I took a step toward the bus mall, but hesitated when I saw Ethan's brow crease. He stared blankly at me for a moment.

"There appears to be a communication issue here," he said, continuing to watch me closely. "I assumed I would be giving you a ride home at the end of the day. It would seem, however, that I have not actually asked you. I apologize for that," he said earnestly, then added with the utmost sincerity, "May I drive you home?"

I suppressed a smile.

Who talks like that?

"I appreciate the offer, but I've already taken up too much of your time today. I really don't want to impose."

Ethan frowned.

"It's no imposition and you needn't be concerned about my time—I'm not busy," he said with a slight edge to his words. "You're tired, and after that dizzy spell I would feel better if I saw you safely home." It wasn't a request. I paused uncertainly, glancing between Ethan and the bus mall. Let's face it, we all know which of those alternatives was more attractive.

"I'm sorry," Ethan added in a softer tone, studying me with intense jade eyes. "That was rude of me. *Please*," he said gently, "let me take you home."

I have to admit, he had me at "sorry".

"All right," I conceded.

He smiled then, a look of relief sweeping across his face.

"Thank you. May I take your backpack?" He held out his hand expectantly. I relinquished my bag—I didn't see the point in arguing—and he turned down the path. I easily fell in step beside him, just as if I had done the very same thing a thousand times before. I was a little confused when Ethan stopped beside a truck—until I heard the *chunk* of the doors unlocking.

"What happened to your car?" I asked.

"Theo's driving it. I took the truck today."

Oh.

I inspected the truck. It was new, and silver, and shiny. I knew even less about trucks than I did about cars, but it had the Toyota insignia on it—I knew that one.

Ethan opened the passenger door for me and offered me his hand to help me into the seat. Our hands held and I felt something like an electrical shock—the kind you get when someone walks across carpet with shoes on then touches you. It didn't hurt, but it did tingle. I glanced up at Ethan and saw him stiffen as he looked down at our hands, his brows drawing together. I fell ungracefully into the passenger seat at that point, and we both quickly drew back our hands.

Ethan went around the front of the truck to the driver's side, studying his hand as he went and flexing it. He climbed into the truck, dropping my backpack onto the floor by my feet. He started the truck and guided it smoothly out into traffic. Once again, I breathed in that clear scent. At least he couldn't put the top down with this vehicle, I thought with a smile.

I felt the steady rhythm of the truck as it drove, and fatigue found me—a true *hit-the-wall-with-no-skid-marks* sort of tired. I put my head back and closed my eyes. The warmth of the truck combined with Ethan's scent soothed my headache.

I began to relax, my sleepless nights catching up to me. Flashes of my restless nights drifted through my thoughts: Liam, Ethan, shadows, growling. After a few moments, however, the images settled, giving way to other thoughts. I noticed a pulsing against my ears, almost an audible sound, but not quite. I listened to (or maybe *felt*) the sound. The rhythm was familiar, and I tried to recall what it was it reminded me of.

A heartbeat.

Sure, that was it. That idea seemed to make sense to me at the time, anyway. Through my muddled brain, I listened more closely, hearing a hollow whooshing sound in addition to the pulse of air on my ears. It sounded like waves on a shore, or something you'd hear with earplugs in your ears.

Breathing.

The smooth cadence of the sounds—inexorably woven together in a timeless, hypnotic rhythm—quieted my headache and stilled my restless thoughts. I felt myself falling into the sounds, my own breathing moving in sync.

“Elly? Elly?”

Ethan's anxious voice yanked me from my sleep. I bolted upright, my eyes snapping open. My pulse hammered in my temples, and I scanned around, unfocused and trying to get my bearings. I stared out the window, confused by the scene sliding past: everything seemed to be moving in slow motion while we continued on, passing by people and other vehicles as though they were standing still.

“Elly?” I heard Ethan say again, alarmed now. “Are you all right?”

I felt my heart pounding fast and high. I glanced at Ethan, then back out the window. The scenes around me had once again settled into their normal pace, the other vehicles on the road racing past. I took several halting breaths.

“Um, yeah, I must have drifted off for a minute,” I answered uncertainly. I turned back to Ethan. His brow relaxed then and he took a breath, his attention returning to his driving.

“Do you have a busy night tonight?” Ethan asked quietly.

“No,” I replied, “just some studying. Actually,” I said, considering, “I think I'll just go to bed early.”

“Probably a good idea.”

We stopped in front of my apartment building. I turned to grab my backpack, but Ethan already had it slung over his shoulder and was halfway out the driver's door. He reached my door, pulled it open, and waited for me to climb out of the truck. He didn't offer a hand to help

me down. When I had exited the truck, he handed me my backpack.

“Thanks for the ride,” I said, “and thanks again for all of your help today.”

“Don’t mention it,” Ethan said lightly. He turned and made his way around the truck. “I’ll see you in class tomorrow,” he called over his shoulder.

He got into his truck and drove away while I stood watching from the sidewalk.

Chapter 4: Down the Rabbit Hole

I walked irritably along the campus pathway to my class, the prevailing early morning clouds reflecting my mood. I had gone through the entire day before without seeing Ethan—not once. He hadn't shown up to any of my classes, leaving me anxious and miserable by the end of the day. My wretched day had segued into another dismal night. I now faced a long day of classes to be capped off with an extended evening in the library researching a paper. Add to that several sleep-impooverished nights and we had a winning day all lined up.

I really need to start drinking coffee.

I sullenly made my way past the Geology building, brooding over the day ahead. I stepped off the path, making my way around a fenced-off construction area. The front stonework was being renewed—evidently the building needed a face-lift. A veritable mountain of construction material and moving equipment, including a tall pile of large, rough stones, had accumulated in front of the building, effectively blocking off the path. I reluctantly stepped around the construction site and onto the grass, getting my sneakers wet in the process.

Lovely.

I sighed in exasperation and stopped to examine my shoes. I stood, frowning down at my shoes, wondering just how long they would take to dry (and how much they would rub my feet until they did). Suddenly, I heard a dusty, scraping sound behind me. The noise grew louder, and I looked up to see the frontend loader turning toward me, the bucket lifted high above and weighed down with a large load of rocks. I watched in horror as the topmost stone very slowly began to tilt off the pile leaning in my direction. My muscles seized and I stood, frozen in place.

Everything from that point on seemed to move in slow motion. I heard my name being called, seemingly from a distance somewhere off to my right. Just as I turned toward the sound, something big and non-negotiable slammed into me from behind, sending me rolling across the wet grass, my backpack flying off in the opposite direction. A thunderous noise crashed down on me from every angle, drowning out all other sounds and setting off a loud ringing in my ears. Then, as suddenly as the noise had begun, everything went silent and eerily still.

I blinked several times, trying to see through the white, chalky cloud that had suddenly shut me off from the rest of the world. I coughed as the scratchy dust settled in my throat. Somewhere far off, men shouted. I tried to right myself, but couldn't move, caught in the steel-band grip of two arms. I glanced back over my shoulder to find Ethan's face close to mine.

“Are you alright?” Ethan asked urgently.

I don't know. Am I?

My heart was pounding out a rapid beat, drowning out the noise of my short, rapid breathing. I didn't feel any pain—only the warmth of Ethan against my back.

“Elly,” Ethan said more emphatically this time, “are you alright?” The tenor of his voice close to my ear slowed my heart and I took a breath. It was another moment before I could answer him.

“I’m fine,” I answered, without actually verifying that fact.

“The workmen are coming,” Ethan warned. “Under no circumstances can you make them aware I am here,” he ordered, not moving and still holding me in an iron-clad grip.

“What?!” I asked incredulously. “What are you talking about?” I asked, trying to turn my head to see him. “*Obviously . . .*”

“Quiet! Don’t talk to me. They can’t see or hear me, but they can see and hear you.”

Excuse me?!

“You will NOT acknowledge my presence,” Ethan commanded when I didn’t respond.

Is he insane?

I twisted around as best I could, casting him a perplexed frown. My heart rate gained speed again.

“Let me go!” I insisted, self-preservation kicking in full tilt. He didn’t move. My breathing quickened to match my heart rate, and I squirmed trying to loosen Ethan’s grip. Ethan put his cheek against my head, speaking directly into my ear. His tone became plaintive.

“Elly, *please*,” he begged, “don’t let on I’m here. You have to trust me.”

The desperate tone in his voice—or maybe the way his hushed words brushed against my ear—brought my struggles up short. Through the settling dust I saw two men hurrying toward us. My mind raced, trying to find some foothold on reality amidst the insanity around me. I didn’t find one.

“Hey lady, are you all right?” one of the workers asked, dust flying off his overalls as he hurried over to where I lay. The other worker stepped up beside me, offering a hand up. Ethan released his hold on me then and I reached to take the man’s hand.

“Are you hurt?” the worker asked. I glanced at the workmen and then at the students who had gathered around—all eyes on me. No one was looking at Ethan.

“I don’t think so,” I finally answered, finding myself standing on shaky legs. My gaze darted to Ethan when he moved a short distance away.

Whoa!

I stumbled back a step and felt the workman’s steadying hand on my shoulder. Ethan crouched on the balls of his sneakered feet, the fingers of one hand resting on the grass for balance, the other hand on the hilt of a long sword that hung in its sheath from his belt. My eyes widened and my muscles tightened as my gaze locked with his steel blue eyes.

Ethan held up both hands as if in surrender, remaining perfectly balanced. He shook his head, a desperate light turning his eyes a darker blue. I turned to the workman beside me who stood watching me, concern colouring his features. I looked around at the students who had gathered, then fixed another curious glance on Ethan. I turned back to the workman, craning my head to see around him. A large pile of rocks lay in a heap right where I had been standing, the loader lying crookedly beside the pile.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” the workman asked.

I nodded numbly.

“Yeah, just a bit dizzy from the fall.”

“How did you get clear of that?”

My mind raced. Ethan was frantically shaking his head at me. I looked away. My heart hammered in my chest, and I had to work hard to draw a decent breath. I was very aware of Ethan crouched a short way off—*with a sword in his hand!* I scanned the faces of the people

gathered around me. No one seemed to register the fact that a sword-wielding lunatic was in their midst. They only stared at me. My mind flashed to Liam coming in late for class, and then to Ethan speaking with him in front of the Chemistry building.

Okay, so either all of these people were insane or I was. Frankly, I wasn't certain which at that point, but given the sword-wielding lunatic present in this equation, it likely wasn't the time to put that question to a test. For a fraction of a second, I wondered what Ethan intended to do with the sword, but resolutely shoved the thought aside before I could panic. I mean, who was going to protect me from someone whom, apparently, could not be seen? I turned back to the workers, decisiveness calming my frantically beating heart. I took a breath.

"Um, I tripped over a rock on the sidewalk. I must have fallen just when the loader tipped over. I guess I fell out of the way."

It sounded plausible, if only slightly. It *could* have happened. Weren't there all kinds of stories about near misses and improbable escapes? I wondered how many times an invisible sword-wielding man might have been present at those incidents. I pushed that thought away. The workman only studied me for a moment and my heart pounded. I hated lying.

"Really? That fast? And you're not hurt?"

"No, I'm perfectly all right. I'm fine," I insisted.

The workman just shook his head, casting me a quizzical glance. I casually reached down to brush the grass off my pants, ignoring his unspoken questions. The two men helped me gather my things, apologizing profusely the entire time. The people in the crowd began drifting off in various directions and the workmen went to clean up the rocks and mangled fence. What they were going to do about the loader I couldn't have guessed.

When everyone had moved off, I turned to where Ethan remained crouched on the grass. He was looking past me now at the pile of rubble with a dark expression on his face. Suddenly he sprang forward, making a dash toward the pile of rocks. I cringed, holding my hands up in front of my face, wondering just how badly a sword wound would hurt. I felt Ethan rush past me and lowered my hands to follow his movement.

Ethan made an impossible leap—contrary to a number of the laws of physics, I was sure—and landed on top of the rock pile in front of the building. I looked at the boulders just in time to see a crooked figure disappear behind the rocks. Ethan dropped down the far side of the rock pile in pursuit of the dark figure, pulling his sword from its sheath as he went.

My mouth dropped open and I felt the blood drain from my face. My stomach turned uneasily. My gaze darted to the workmen again. They only continued about their business, trying to right the tipped loader. They hadn't so much as looked up.

Maybe I am insane.

I considered the rocks for several seconds, then cautiously made my way around to the side of them, peering behind the pile. The area was empty—no Ethan and no ... whatever that had been.

I scanned the area warily, jerking my backpack more firmly onto my shoulder. The only movement I could see was that of the other students in the Bowl as they made their way to classes. I continued slowly down the path to my next class, casting my eyes about for anything that might be coming at me—like a crazy person with a sword, for example—but saw nothing unusual. By the time I reached my class I was able to breathe again, but the tension in my muscles remained until the afternoon. I kept a wary eye out as I went through the motions of my day.

I sat at a table in the library feeling stiff and sore as I finished jotting down my notes.

Whether from the tumble in the Bowl or long hours sitting I didn't know. I had gone to the library to work on an essay, but the morning escapades in the Bowl replayed persistently in my mind like insipid elevator music, disrupting my concentration. I couldn't seem to get anywhere with my paper.

The lights flicked off and then back on, signaling closing time. I looked up from my notes to find the library empty. I closed the book on the table in front of me and tried to loosen my aching shoulders as I turned to look out the library window.

Shoot!

It was getting dark! I glanced down at my watch, realized how late it was, then rushed to toss my things into my backpack. Apparently I would be walking my bike home—I didn't have any lights on it. I'd be even more late than I would otherwise, and Jess would have a bird. I flung my backpack over my shoulder, quickly scanning the desk to make certain I hadn't left anything behind, then hurried for the library door. An image of an irate Jess waiting at home flashed across my mind and I winced, quickening my pace.

I hurried out of the building and into the cool air of the Bowl. I shivered and wished I had brought a sweater—but then, I hadn't really intended to be out this late. I set off at a brisk pace down the path to the bike rack. I slowed my steps when the rack came into view, but didn't stop as I pulled off my pack and dug for the bike lock keys. Digging to the bottom of the bag, I finally felt the smooth, cool surface of the key and drew it out triumphantly. I looked up, and saw my bike just in front of the Chemistry Building. It was one of only three bikes left in the rack, the other two seemingly permanently rusted to the rack itself.

I scanned the Bowl as I walked. No one else was around and no sound disturbed the crisp evening air. Nevertheless, my heart beat quickly, and I checked over my shoulder often. I heard a muffled swishing sound off to one side of the Bowl and smelled the faint scent of rotting garbage when the breeze blew across my face. I wrinkled my nose against the smell. My mind flashed to my walk through the park, and I surveyed the area again for the bazillionth time, still seeing nothing untoward. Ethan's face flashed to mind then—along with the image of his sword. A crawling sensation slithered down my spine and I hurried along the path, clutching my key tightly in my hand.

I never made it anywhere near my bike. About half-way there, a movement off to my left caught my eye. Looking closer, I saw two figures just beyond the bike rack. They were heading straight toward me. I stopped, torn by indecision: run for my bike so I could make a faster getaway, or run in the other direction on foot. I glanced between the two figures and my bike, trying to gauge my chances of getting to it before they got to me. The figures moved cautiously, their eyes constantly searching the grassy area between us.

The bike.

I peered at the figures through the quickly fading light. They skulked across the Bowl, their stooped and bulky frames draped in shapeless dark coats that pooled into the shadows at their feet. Their eyes darted around furtively as they moved. They stopped occasionally, checking behind them before continuing toward me.

Well, at least I can see what's coming.

My steps slowed as my heart beat faster. I thought I could actually hear it at one point. I considered the two figures again, wondering if I was over-reacting. I decided my fears were legitimate when I saw one of them draw something long out from behind its back. I forced deep

breaths of air into my lungs, trying to keep panic at bay and trying to think. I searched the area hoping to see other students or staff, but no one was around. I tried to locate an alarm booth to call security. But ... the only alarm I could see was on the other side of the two figures.

Of course.

I continued on toward my bike, keeping a wary eye on the approaching figures as I dug through my bag. I pulled out my cell phone, not entirely certain who I was about to call. Thumbing the screen, I pressed the speed dial for home, desperately hoping Jess would be there. I put the phone to my ear and heard only the sibilance of static. I glanced down at my phone frowning. It was charged—what was the problem? I hung up and tried again: same result.

Great!

I dropped the phone back into my pack, looked at the two figures again, and hurried toward my bike. I thought about each step between me and my bike and each movement I would have to make to unlock the chain, wondering just how fast I could move through the process. If I dropped my pack, I would be able to bike at a pretty good clip without the extra weight—provided I didn't run into anything in the dark.

The two figures had separated and were walking in different directions now. Their paths would bring one of them on either side of me, and I'd be trapped between them and the bike rack.

Change of plan.

I turned abruptly and headed to my right, aiming for the door of the Chemistry building. I'd have to cross the path of one of them this way, but I hoped to get to the building before he got to me. I devoutly hoped the building was not locked.

I choked down the fear and panic wrestling in my chest, barely contained. My breathing was erratic and my pulse was hammering in my ears—I could hear it clearly now. With the threatening panic, however, came a calm certainty: the certainty that these figures carried with them the same dread that had haunted my nights. With that certainty came a sort of relief. I now knew what it was I had to fight.

Determination kicked in and I quickened my pace. I watched the rough looking figures as they approached. Their forms began to take shape in the dim light as they drew closer, and I wondered just what these *things* were. Men—maybe—their features sharp and skeleton-like, their forms bent and twisted, their eyes dull.

Like death warmed over.

My stomach tightened, and I forced myself to keep walking—and breathing. I slowly let my backpack slide off my shoulder and fall heavily to the ground, abandoned, as I readied myself to run. I had taken exactly one step when suddenly the two rough figures halted in their tracks, turning. I paused mid-stride, following their gaze and wondering what else was coming. I didn't want to run straight into something even worse than the things I was trying to get away from. Just then, I saw two men step out from behind the Geology building to my right. They strode purposefully toward the dark figures.

The crumpled figures moved closer together then, their voices guttural as they spoke to one another in low tones. Even though they were a good distance off, I could hear their conversation, their words carried on the waves of the cooling night air. They were arguing. One wanted to “grab the girl and take care of her someplace else”, his words underscored with a snarl. That

made my stomach lurch, but I wasn't scared—not yet anyway. The other insisted that they “wouldn't get far with those three on our tails” and they would “have to finish them all here”. In the end, they had no choice but to face the two men coming at them, still arguing between themselves as the men advanced on them.

I stood in silence, mesmerized, as the four participants approached one another. I had just thought to turn and run when I heard someone call my name from just behind me. I recognized the confident tone immediately. I wasn't surprised, only startled.

Right on cue.

I turned toward Ethan and promptly froze where I stood, my breath catching in my throat. *Now* I was scared. This was an Ethan I had never seen before. My heart, already racing, began pounding in my ears as every fibre in my body tensed. Ethan stood tall and straight, looming in front of me, a sword in his hand, the blade pointing down toward the ground. He wore a fierce expression as he glanced between me and the contenders behind me. I knew he was taller than me, but clad in a long coat and high boots, sword in hand, he seemed even larger than I remembered.

I took several cautious steps back, and Ethan turned to me, his mouth tightening into a thin line. I might have turned and ran, but that would have brought me straight to the dark figures I had been trying to get away from. I was between the proverbial rock and hard place. I glanced back over my shoulder. The four players in the Bowl were slowly advancing on one another, intent on the impending confrontation.

I looked over at the men then, and recognized Theo and Liam, each wearing long coats. The grim expressions on their faces unsettled my stomach, and I shrank back, inadvertently taking a couple of steps closer to Ethan. Like someone watching a train wreck, I couldn't tear my gaze from the scene being played out in the Bowl, waiting for the horror to begin.

Theo and Liam moved in step with one another, and at an unseen signal they both let their coats slide down their arms and onto the ground as their fluid movements carried them forward. They simultaneously reached over their shoulders, each of them drawing a shortsword from behind his back. Holding the swords with both hands they lifted them high above and to the side of their heads pointing the blades directly at the two figures as they advanced. The scene looked fake, like something out of a 'B' movie, and I could only stand and watch. The men's steps quickened. I heard a noise—something akin to a snarl—emanate from one of the rough figures.

The two crooked figures had swords drawn now too, and were standing their ground as Theo and Liam advanced. I scanned the Bowl. Why was there no one else on the entire campus? Surely someone would see this and call the police??

I noticed it then—the Bowl appeared odd. The buildings were faded while the four combatants were clearer and more defined despite the dimming light. I glanced back at Ethan then. He stood, intently watching the scene unfolding before us. His eyes suddenly flashed to mine, a frown on his face.

“Are you alright?” he asked with more than a hint of steel in his tone. My eyes darted to the sword he still held in his hand.

“Look,” I said, putting up both hands, palms out in a gesture of surrender as I moved off to the side. “I don't know who you are or what's going on, but I don't want any part of it.” I stumbled over my discarded backpack but quickly righted myself. Ethan was beside me before his movement had registered in my brain. He grabbed my upper arm in a vise like grip. It didn't hurt, but it did send a jolt through me. I tried to pull away.

“Let me go!” I demanded, struggling to pull my arm free.

Ethan immediately let go of my arm, holding up one hand and unconsciously mimicking my own symbolic surrender just seconds before. I felt a short flash of panic, but doused it quickly. Ethan kept one hand up, palm out while he slid the sword into its sheath with the other. He held up both hands again.

“Elly, calm down. I’m not going to hurt you. I’m trying to help you,” Ethan said in a reassuring tone. My heart rate slowed at the sound of his voice, and I hesitated.

What am I thinking?! The guy has a sword for crying out loud!

I looked to the side—the only direction with no craziness happening—then cast Ethan a sideways glance. I took another step backward, intending to turn and run, but I didn’t make it that far. I heard a growl and a cry from behind me and turned abruptly toward the sound just in time to see one of the two rough figures rush at Liam with sword raised. I felt Ethan’s hand on my shoulder and turned back to him.

“You’ll stay with me,” Ethan said firmly. “Are you hurt?” His tone was brusque again.

No, just terrified.

I shook my head, staring up at him with wide eyes, my heart racing. Ethan looked down at me.

“How are you doing that?”

“Doing *what?*”

“Elly, tell me what you’re seeing,” Ethan demanded impatiently.

“What kind of stupid question is that?! Look!” I said, gesturing toward the four contenders presently engaged in an all-out sword fight in the middle of the campus Bowl. I watched, horrified.

“Elly!” Ethan said sharply, drawing my attention back to him. “Tell me what you see!” he demanded.

I glanced between Ethan and what was now an urban battlefield. I shook my head, my mouth hanging open.

“Fine! I see four crazy guys with swords attacking each other in the middle of the Bowl! They’re over there by the Chemistry building ... only the buildings are hard to see ... and there’s no one else around ... ” I hedged, the words sounding odd as they came out of my mouth.

“They’re kind of ... faded,” I explained. I shook my head and tried again. “The blond b—Liam and your brother are there. Can’t you see them?” I asked in frustration.

Ethan only stood watching me, consternation on his face.

“I can see them,” Ethan said flatly, not turning to look at them. He continued to frown down at me.

“Shouldn’t we *do* something?!” I prompted. I raised both eyebrows at him.

“Yes. We should get you out of here.” He turned, gripped my arm and started to pull me away from the Bowl.

No way.

I pulled back, trying to get free of his iron grip. His hand wouldn’t budge, and I continued to struggle against it futilely. Ethan turned and pulled me closer to him.

“Elly, we need to get you someplace safe,” he said impatiently.

“Safe?! What? With *you*?!” I asked disbelievingly as I glanced down at the sword hanging from his belt. That *had* to be some kind of oxymoron. I drew a deep breath as Ethan and I stared each other down, his eyes turning a slate blue.

“Elly,” Ethan began in a tightly controlled voice, “those two things are after *you*. You *will* be safe with me.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” I said, shaking my head.

I heard Ethan’s exasperated sigh immediately followed by a high-pitched screech that zinged along the nerves in my ear and raced down my spine. I jumped, pressing closer to Ethan, and turned to look behind me all at the same time. Across the Bowl I could see one of the rough figures on the ground. The other one, angry now, threw himself at Ethan’s brother. I lost track of Ethan’s brother for a moment then found him again, well away from the charging figure.

“Elly!” Ethan ordered in a firm tone. I numbly glanced down at Ethan’s hand on my arm and back up to his face. “Elly, you *don’t* want to see this!”

I couldn’t move. I could barely stand, a slight trembling starting in my knees. At some point during this bizarre scene, I think my breathing had stopped entirely. I drew in a ragged breath. Ethan spun me around pulling me against his chest. He grasped my chin with his free hand and lifted my face to his. I stared at him, not really seeing him. The only thing in my head at that moment was the clang of metal on metal coming from the battle behind me.

“Elly, run!” Ethan said urgently. He released my chin and turned, beginning to pull me forward. I turned to take one last look at the four men just in time to see Liam’s sword held high over the neck of the figure that had fallen to the ground. I cringed away and saw no more.

I was jerked forward as Ethan pulled me along by my arm. I stumbled, and Ethan stopped to reposition me on my feet. He tried to continue forward, but I stood, unmoving. He looked back at me disapprovingly.

“Shouldn’t we help them? Shouldn’t we *do* something?” I asked, trying to get my static thoughts to move again. They wouldn’t go past the images in my mind—images of raised swords.

“No, we’re going to get you out of here,” Ethan said sternly.

“You’re not going to help them?!” I asked disbelievingly.

“No, I’m not. Nor will I stand here arguing with you.”

“But we have to do *something!*” I was practically yelling at him. “Don’t you care about your own *brother?*”

“Elly, they’re fine,” Ethan said with an exasperated sigh. “Believe me, they can handle this. You don’t understand what’s happening. We have to get you out of here. That’s what this is all about. Now come with me.” There was a sudden angry cry behind me, followed by the cold, jarring clang of metal on metal. I jumped then, and before any thought could form in my head, I found myself running—*fast*.

We ran so fast I couldn’t distinguish one building from another, all of them blurring together as we moved past. After several minutes, Ethan let go of my arm and we ran even faster. Ethan glanced back once to ensure I still followed him. I had no choice but to follow—I didn’t know where I was; didn’t know where I was going; didn’t even know what I was running from or to.

We ran, my breathing easy and my muscles working tirelessly. It was dark now, but despite the scarce light, I could see everything around me, even the light as it reflected off objects—Ethan’s sword hilt being one of those objects. The breeze that had felt cold in the Bowl now felt warm as it rushed past my bare arms.

On the now-warm breeze I could smell fresh cut wheat, wild roses, cooling cement, car exhaust, and Ethan’s clear scent. The smells collided with one another as they fought for context in my mind. I began to hear sounds—sounds seemingly at odds with the surroundings: birds, cars, rustling leaves, people’s voices, and our feet striking the pavement. The out-of-context

sounds made a disorienting cacophony, tumbling my senses and creating an anachronistic mix of time and place.

I tried to focus on Ethan—tried to keep from getting confused and lost amidst the jumble of scents and sounds. After a few moments, I heard the same rhythm I had heard in Ethan’s truck—the same pulsing of a heartbeat and the same hypnotic swish of breathing. Both were easy and effortless, soothing my jangled nerves and steadying my shaky knees. I listened to the sounds as we ran together. Ethan didn’t glance back, but I saw his head turn slightly to the side, listening.

Instead of the smell of car exhaust or the odour of food from the sort of restaurant that sells you a burger for a buck, I now smelled dirt, cut wheat, and the clean scent of wind on prairie. The sound of car horns, whining engines, and our feet striking pavement gave way to the haunting skitter of dry leaves, the call of a far away songbird, and the hollow rustle of the wind through the trees. I watched as the pale images of buildings blurred past, faded, and morphed into a prairie horizon under a star-filled sky. I slowed my pace and looked around, listening to the sound of Ethan’s heartbeat—my one fixed mark.

How did we get out of the city so fast?

I heard the cadence of Ethan’s steps slow. Some part of my mind registered the fact that his footsteps were coming from somewhere far away, but I only stood, gawking at the lonely country lane I suddenly found myself in. Trees lined the path, and rows of newly cut wheat still formed orderly columns in the fields around, marching off to meet the horizon. The city had simply ... *disappeared*. I turned to find Ethan. He stood a few paces in front of me, his image faded as though a veil hung between us. I watched as he turned in a full circle, worry reflected in his ultramarine eyes.

“Elly?” he called as he glanced around.

What is he looking for?

The next instant Ethan’s image firmed up, and he stood gaping at me with a horrified expression on his face. He gestured toward the side of the road.

“I’ve brought you to my home,” he said in a controlled tone as he watched my face carefully. His brow drew together. “It’s the safest place I could think of for the moment. We need to get inside though. Theo and Liam will meet us here when they’re ... finished.”

I cringed at the mental image his words created. Just how did someone “finish” the scene we had left? I looked to where he gestured, but didn’t see any house. My mind flashed to the episode in the Bowl this afternoon, recalling Ethan’s insistence that no one could see him.

He is crazy.

And quite possibly dangerous. I turned back to him, hesitant and cautious. I took a step back.

“Ethan,” I said with as much calm as I could muster (I was pretty certain it would be a bad idea to agitate a crazy person). “There’s no house there and ... things—you—looked odd.”

Ethan stared at me with an anxious expression. I took another step back. Ethan’s image faded again. His eyes widened then narrowed, his brow furrowed as he continued to study me. I saw his image become more solid again and he glanced in the direction he indicated earlier. He frowned at me, his voice cautious and low as he spoke.

“Elly, you’re in the wrong frequency. You have to shift down now. It’s very dangerous for you to be here.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked, losing my grip on calm. “You keep saying things

that make no sense.” I needed to know what was going on and he was talking nonsense. I looked around for anything threatening, feeling my pulse in my temples. I could see nothing to be afraid of, unless ... I cast Ethan a suspicious glance. My heart rate began to increase again just as my breath caught in my throat.

“No!” Ethan yelled.

He stepped toward me and I jumped back. He halted in his tracks then took a half step back, lifting his hands, palms toward me.

“Please stop,” he said urgently. “Please. Just stand still. I’m sorry I frightened you. I won’t harm you.”

My eyes flickered to the sword hanging from his hip.

“Don’t be frightened,” Ethan continued, “It will only make this more difficult. Look at me,” he commanded.

I tore my eyes from his sword and lifted them to his face. He held my gaze as he began speaking quietly.

“Everything is going to be all right. I need you to close your eyes and calm down. You need to slow down your system. I need you to focus for a minute. Please.”

How would that help anything? That was the opposite of what I wanted to do right now. He took two steps back from me, keeping his hands raised and I felt my muscles relax, but only a little.

“Elly, please,” Ethan begged. I swallowed hard.

“Let me think for a minute,” I pleaded desperately.

“Yes, all right,” Ethan said in a placating tone.

I stood, watching him closely. I tried to make my mind yield any scrap of helpful information. What was I supposed to do here? There was no “little voice” in my head warning of danger. No indication of imminent harm. But still ...

“I don’t know what’s going on,” I said to Ethan, “but I don’t want any part of it. I want to go home now.”

Ethan’s brow furrowed and an anxious expression came over his face.

“Can we please discuss this when you’ve calmed down? It’s vital we get you out of this time frequency—now.”

“I don’t know what that means,” I said, the panic rising.

“Don’t be frightened,” Ethan said again. “I can get you back to where you belong. Please just do as I say, and I’ll tell you what you need to know. It will take a while to explain and I need to get you to a safer place first. Please slow down.”

“I’m not moving. How can I slow down?” I asked giving Ethan a hard look. “And how is this the wrong place for me? Where else is there?”

“Elly, you’re panicking. You have to calm down,” Ethan insisted. “Please just close your eyes.”

I studied him distrustfully and saw him wince.

“Please, Elly, just close your eyes,” Ethan repeated somewhat hopelessly.

I cast him a sideways glance, then slowly closed my eyes.

“Thank you,” Ethan said gently. “Now breathe.”

I took a deep breath, my stomach relaxing somewhat. I heard Ethan sigh in relief.

“Listen to your heart beating and try to slow it down,” he instructed.

I did, a little startled when I felt two hearts echoing somewhere in the back of my head, one more slowly than the other. As I listened, the two heartbeats fell into step with one another,

beating out the same steady rhythm. I stood listening, hoping desperately I would find myself in my own bed when I opened my eyes and this would all have been some bizarre nightmare. My muscles loosened and the knots in my stomach untangled.

“Good. Thank you,” Ethan said gently. “That should do. I can see you here now. Open your eyes and tell me: what do you see?”

Again with that stupid question.

I was afraid to look. I opened my eyes reluctantly then took several startled steps backward into the middle of the paved road. I was facing a *very* large two-story house sitting off to one side of the country lane. Beside the house was a garage with numerous doors. Ethan’s car was in the driveway. I turned slowly in a complete circle, unable to make sense of the change in scene.

Where did the house come from?

I checked behind me. The country landscape was different too. There were no more trees—a white fence now separated the field from the road. The field was different too. No cut wheat lay waiting to be harvested. Now tall grass grew wildly as far as I could see. A horse grazed calmly off in the distance. I turned back to Ethan, my head spinning, and my heart beginning to pound again.

“Where are we?” I demanded. I couldn’t help glancing down at the sword again. “Where have you taken me?”

“My home,” Ethan said. “I can explain, but first we need to get inside.”

Are you kidding me?

“I *really* don’t think so,” I said, shaking my head firmly. I took another step backward, spinning around in mid stride, my foot striking the pavement hard and fast. Before my other foot moved, Ethan’s arm closed around my waist from behind.

“No! I can’t let you do that. You mustn’t run.” He held me fast, my back pressed against his chest, his voice low in my ear. An intense feeling of *déjà vu* stole over me as a wave of dizziness poured over my body, weakening my knees again.

“Elly, we need to get inside.” I could feel the vibration of his words against my back. His soft breath swirled against my cheek as he spoke, giving my head another spin. I felt his breathing quicken as he held me against him, and I could feel the warmth of his body fending off the cool night air that pressed in around us. The muscles of his forearm tightened beneath my hands as I struggled to push it away. My hands tingled where they came in contact with his skin. The more I struggled the dizzier I became.

“Elly,” Ethan continued, his voice low in my ear, “those creatures in the Bowl were after you. More will be sent in their place. They *will* find you again. You must stay with me. It’s for your own safety.”

My mind pushed forward the scene in the Bowl as the crooked figures had moved steadily toward me. My thoughts flashed to Liam and Theo, left behind to fight the creatures as Ethan and I ran away. And finally, I thought of the feel of Ethan’s arm under my hands and the smell of his clear scent as it filled my head. My mental sorting took only a fraction of a second, and I stopped straining against his arm, leaning against him instead and taking a deep breath. Ethan relaxed his grip around my waist then but didn’t let go.

“If I let you go, you won’t run, will you?” he challenged. The echo of *déjà vu* eased, and the tilt-o-whirl spinning stilled.

“No,” I said. “Not if you’ll tell me what’s going on,” I bargained.

“I’ll try to help you to understand when we’re in the house,” he replied evenly, “but first you’ll call Jessica and tell her where you are. I don’t want her worrying and wandering the campus trying to find you. I don’t know what those creatures might do to her if they find her instead of you.” A chill went down my spine and I shuddered.

“All right,” I said in defeat, “let’s go.”

Chapter 5: Waking up in Wonderland

Ethan let go of my waist, but caught my hand as I turned around. Somewhere in the far recesses of my mind I registered the solid warmth of his large, slightly rough hand wrapped firmly around my own. The thought crumbled under the weight of the mental image of Jess' reaction to all of this. She would be wondering where I was by now. My stomach lurched and I was suddenly anxious to get to a phone.

Ethan pulled me up the front steps of his house to the wide, porch and on through the front entry. He moved so fast it seemed he hadn't even paused to open the door. One moment we were climbing the steps, then in a fraction of a second, we were in the front hall and Ethan was flicking on the light switch. I didn't stop to ask questions nor did I look around. I immediately turned to Ethan.

"May I have my pack, please? My phone's in there." Before I had finished my sentence, Ethan had the bag off his back and was holding it out to me. I dug through the front pocket for my phone and swiped it on, hitting the speed dial for home. I waited impatiently, listening to the electronic imitation of a ringing phone. I didn't have to wait long. Jess answered after one ring.

"Hello?" she answered with anxious relief.

"Hey Jess. Just me," I said, trying to sound casual.

"Elly!" Jess barked. "I was worried. I was just about to call Mom and Dad. Where are you?" she demanded.

"I know, I know. I'm sorry I didn't call sooner. I got a little carried away at the library. It was getting dark by the time I finished."

"I *told* you not to stay late," she admonished.

Ethan frowned at me, shaking his head. I rolled my eyes.

Oh please, give me some credit.

Obviously, the less Jess knew the better—for my sake.

"I know you did and I'm sorry," I said into the phone, turning away from Ethan. "I just lost track of time. But I ran into Ethan on my way to my bike. We didn't think it was a good idea for me to bike home this late. He's giving me a ride home ...," I turned to Ethan, an eyebrow arched in question. He nodded. "... but we had to stop at his place on the way. I'll be home in a while." I saw Ethan take a breath.

"What?!" Jess yelled. I winced and held the phone away from my ear. "Are you insane?! You hardly know him!" I glanced up to see a wry smile on Ethan's face. I held the phone to my ear again.

"Well, I'm getting to know him," I said. "Trust me Jess—I *know* what I'm doing."

"Like all the other times you just knew?"

"Yeah. Just like that."

There was a pause on the other end of the line. Then: "I'm still not happy about this. When will you be home?"

"I'm not sure. We'll probably hang out here for a while first." Cold silence.

“Fine,” Jess responded tersely. “You’re certain you’ll be all right with him?”

“Yeah, I’m sure,” I said, fervently hoping I wasn’t wrong. “Hey, Jess,” I added, “you’re not working tonight or anything, are you? You’ll be at home if I call?”

“Yeah, I’ll be home tonight. Where are you? I can come get you if you want.”

How would I know where I am?

“No, you don’t need to do that,” I said a little too quickly. “But I’ll call you if I need you,” I added more slowly, trying to sound casual. “I’ll talk to you when I get home, okay?”

“Yeah, okay,” Jess said, a reluctant and unconvinced tone colouring her words. “Bye. And be careful!”

I smiled a small smile and hung up. Dropping the phone back into my bag, I looked up at Ethan. I took a deep breath.

“All right,” I said, “she’s fine and she likely won’t be going anywhere tonight—she’ll stay at home in case I call.”

“Not bad,” Ethan said, one eyebrow raised.

I only watched him expectantly, noticing the lighter tone in his cerulean eyes. I was about to demand he start explaining, but I was distracted by the quick flicker of something I couldn’t quite read in his eyes as they turned a darker shade of blue. Ethan took my pack from me, and placing a hand lightly on the small of my back, guided me into the next room.

“I’m glad she’s all right,” he said quietly, sounding genuinely reassured by the information. I felt the thrill of his hand on my back followed immediately by keen disappointment as he dropped his hand all too quickly. Ethan continued past me and across the room, turning on a lamp in the far corner.

The light revealed a large, welcoming living room. It was furnished with a comfortable looking sofa and love seat opposite one another. The furniture appeared new although it was of an older style. The colours were quiet and subdued under the lamp light as it lingered and slowly filled the room. I regarded the inviting form of the sofa and was struck by the unexpected thought that this would be a very nice place to read a good book. I took a deep breath and felt my jangled nerves relax somewhat.

“Perhaps you ought to sit down,” Ethan suggested, gesturing to the sofa as he set my bag on the floor.

I jumped guiltily thinking he was responding to my errant thoughts about reading a book. I hesitated, but Ethan only stood, waiting.

I sat on the couch and turned to Ethan. He was still standing at the end of the room near the lamp, the suffocating black of the night sky filling the large window behind him. He considered me for several long moments, hands on hips, a slight frown marring his features.

“So are you going to tell me what you’ve gotten me mixed up in?” I prompted.

He shook his head and looked down, chuckling wryly. He ran a hand through his thick, dark hair, letting it rest on his neck for a moment.

“What have *I* got *you* mixed up in ...,” he mused quietly to himself. He grimaced then, his forehead creasing. He remained motionless, lost in thought for a moment before he spoke again. “I’m not quite certain how much to tell you, or how much you want to know for that matter. I don’t even know where to begin,” he stated evenly.

“If I’m involved in whatever is going on, I need to know everything.”

He dropped his hand to his side and looked up at me, his expression that of a man trying to decide which fork in the road to take. I thought I saw a glimmer of sadness deepening his eyes.

“It will change things for you,” he said with a hint of regret in his tone. “I’m not supposed

to let that happen.”

“I think things have already changed for me,” I said quietly, breaking away from his gaze. I stared down at the floor, my heart hammering in my ears. I cast him a sideways glance. He nodded, frowning then sighed heavily.

“Where do I start?” He may have been talking to himself, but I answered him anyway.

“The Bowl. What was that all about?” I asked straightforwardly. Ethan took a breath before he spoke.

“Those ... *men* in the Bowl—*the others*. They were sent after you. Theo, Liam and I were there to stop them. We were protecting you.”

“I don’t understand,” I said frowning and shaking my head. “They were *after* me? Why would anyone be after *me*?”

There was a sudden loud thumping outside the door and I jumped to my feet. Ethan took several quick steps forward to stand between the door and me, his hand moving to the sword at his side. He drew the blade part way out of its sheath and stood, tense and waiting.

I took a step to the side trying to see around him, my pulse picking up speed again. We waited. For a moment I was convinced time had actually stopped, but then the door swung open and Theo and Liam spilled into the entry. They brought with them the thudding of heavy boots on a wooden floor, the rustling of greatcoats, and the smell of waxed cotton. The clang of metal on metal rang through my head bringing with it the scene from the Bowl and the memory of a guttural snarl. My stomach tightened.

Liam entered the room ahead of Theo, but checked his steps abruptly when he caught sight of me, his stormy eyes locking with mine. Theo continued forward for half a step more, laughing and managing to say, “Did you see the way ... ,” just as he ran into Liam’s still form from behind.

“Hey! What ... ,” Theo said peevishly just before his gaze landed on me. He fell silent, his hazel eyes darkening to a deep brown. Liam glanced between Ethan and me. He studied me for a moment, his brow puckered and his mouth turned down at one corner. Ethan shoved his sword back into its sheath with the solid clunk of metal hitting wood.

“Elly,” Ethan said, all the while keeping his eyes fixed on Theo, “I’d like you to meet Liam and my brother, Theo.”

Theo’s brows drew together.

“*Aithen! Hvid I’ chi ...*,” Theo objected as he stepped out from behind Liam. I couldn’t understand the words, but it was clear from Theo’s tone that he was unhappy about something. Ethan held up a silencing hand.

“I know, Theo. I know.”

“Is she all right?” Liam asked quietly. Liam cast me a quick sideways glance but otherwise kept his attention on Ethan. Ethan turned to me for answer.

I didn’t know if Liam was referring to what happened in the Bowl earlier this evening or if everyone in the room could hear the echoing of my heart as it pounded in my chest. I took a deep, shaky breath trying to slow its frantic beat.

“I’m fine,” I said in a surprisingly steady tone. I met Ethan’s gaze as he turned an unreadable expression on me. I straightened up and squared my shoulders.

Probably not the best time to lose it.

“So ... ,” I began with more conviction than I felt. “Those ... *the others* in the Bowl...” I said calmly, watching Ethan. “You said they were sent after me?” I reminded myself to breathe.

“Yes,” he said simply and quietly. His attention stayed riveted on my face. I gazed down at

the floor, my chest tight. Liam entered the room slowly and went to sit on the far end of the sofa. He was quiet and grave, glancing between Ethan and me. My knees felt rubbery, and I went to sit down on the sofa too. Theo moved further into the room keeping a steady eye on me. Ethan sat down on the chair across from me.

“Why?” I whispered, looking up to meet Ethan’s gaze. I swallowed. “What do they want?” I asked a little more loudly.

Ethan’s mouth turned down and he hesitated, studying the floor again.

“They want to—” he halted in mid-sentence, wincing over the unspoken words. “They’re dangerous,” he finished lamely casting me a pained glance.

I exhaled sharply, my breath torn from my lungs. He didn’t actually say it—he didn’t have to. When I could draw a breath again, I asked roughly, “Why—why do they want to kill me?” I barely choked out the words. It was still difficult to pull in air and I had to force my ribs to move in order to do it. I tried to focus on what Ethan was saying.

“Liam can answer that better than I can,” Ethan said, turning to Liam. Liam’s gaze darted up to Ethan in surprise. Ethan gave a resigned nod of his head. Liam frowned and cast me a reluctant glance then turned away again before he spoke.

“It’s because of the things you can do,” he finally said. I looked at each of the three faces in the room in turn, my brow furrowing in confusion. I shook my head lightly.

“What? *Biochemistry questions*? I don’t know what you mean.” No one said anything. “You mean because I have quick reflexes—because I can move fast?”

Liam didn’t answer immediately, instead studying Ethan with a sober expression on his face. Ethan met his gaze and one corner of Liam’s mouth turned down.

“That’s part of it. You’re a threat to them,” Liam answered.

“I really don’t know how I could be a threat to anyone.” I rubbed at the dull ache building at the back of my head. It hit me then, another puzzle piece falling into place. I looked up at Ethan, exhaling sharply.

“Before you said . . . ,” I stumbled over the thought in my mind and had to start again. “You said you were here to protect me. That’s why you gave me a ride home and why you talked to me in class—you were only protecting me.” My stomach lurched and I wondered if I could keep its contents in place.

Oh no. My parents were right!

“Yes,” Ethan said, studying me closely. “It’s our job to protect you.”

His words were like a slap in the face to a hysteric. I went numb until the room began to spin. I closed my eyes then trying to still the swells of dizziness as the word “job” clanged in my brain. I forced air into my lungs and the dizziness eased. After a moment I opened my eyes again. Ethan stood and came to sit beside me on the sofa.

“You needn’t be frightened, Elly,” he said earnestly. “No one is going to hurt you. We won’t let that happen.”

He thinks I’m scared?

No, I didn’t fear the men hunting me. My own stupid hope was my worst enemy at the moment. I stared up at him. Concern filled his face, his eyes dark. There was no way I was explaining this. I only nodded.

Theo was suddenly off his perch on the side of Ethan’s chair, glancing between Ethan and Liam with a shocked look on his face.

“*Aithen! Hweyth umen e’ I’ chi?!?*” he asked Ethan in an urgent half-whisper.

“English, Theo. English,” Ethan said firmly. Theo frowned at me, then turned back to Ethan.

“Fine,” Theo continued tersely. “Ethan, she shouldn’t know any of this. It’s bad enough that we’re even talking to her. She’s not supposed to know about us *at all*.”

Ethan stood up abruptly, forcing Theo back several steps. Ethan raked his hand through his hair again as he began pacing the room.

“I understand that, Theo,” Ethan said, his well-controlled tone thinly veiling the desperation reflected in his eyes. “I had no choice. She shifted on the way here. She saw for herself.”

“*Ni hrocius?!?*” Theo gaped.

“*Shifted?* Completely?!” Liam asked as he stood, his expression a mix of incredulity and dismay. Ethan nodded. All three of them turned to stare at me. Each one wore an expression that appeared to be an odd mix of worry and confusion.

What are they on about?

“Are you okay? How do you feel?” Liam asked, searching my face.

What was with these guys and weird questions?

I shook my head, my brow creasing as I tried to apply some context to his question. “Fine. I mean ...,” I actually thought about it then. “I’m just ... confused ... and a little tired ... and my head hurts.” The evening suddenly felt to be dragging on and I knew my knees would be shaky if I tried to walk. What had they just said?

Shifting.

“What’s *shifting?*” I asked, trying to concentrate. “Is that *bad?*” I was worried now.

“Not *bad* exactly,” Ethan said, watching me closely. “At least not in the sense that it’s *wrong*,” Ethan said reassuringly. “It’s ... unusual and rather risky. Liam’s only concerned for your safety. We all are.”

Only concerned for my safety ...

The words reverberated through my mind like a bullet ricocheting in a steel box, each report getting louder and louder and punctuated by the word “job”. I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to shut out the noise in my brain—trying to focus.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I said, rubbing my forehead in an attempt to ease the building ache. It was becoming difficult to follow the conversation. My head felt heavy. I rubbed my eyes to clear some of the muddle.

“Are you okay?” Liam asked again, taking a step closer.

“I’m fine. I’m just very tired. I think I should go home now.” The three men exchanged sober glances.

“Could be the shift,” Liam said, speaking quietly to Ethan. “It’s tiring until you build up some tolerance for it. Your body has to deal with the time changes.” I could hear him—could hear the words he was saying, but somehow they didn’t make sense—didn’t fit together in any coherent manner. I had to replay his words several times in my head before I could assemble them into any sort of meaning.

“Is it just fatigue or is she becoming ill from it?” Ethan asked anxiously.

“I can’t really say for sure, but she couldn’t have been there long enough to get sick. I remember going through something like this when I first started shifting.”

“I wonder if we shouldn’t keep her here for the night to monitor this,” Ethan suggested.

“Ethan, do you really think that’s going to help this situation?” Theo asked, his eyes wide.

“We can’t send her home like this. We won’t be able to help her if things go sideways,” Liam reasoned.

“Ethan, we can’t ... ,” Theo objected, but he glanced at me then and left his sentence unfinished.

“Please,” I said, mostly to quiet their voices—voices that pressed in on my head from every side. “I can’t stay. Jess will freak. She knows I would never stay away all night.” Even as I objected I wondered how I was going to manage getting up off the sofa—let alone getting home. Maybe if I just put my head down for a while ... it felt so heavy. I let my head drop back onto the sofa. My body sank into the relief that accompanies resting tired muscles. It was a comfortable couch.

“Regardless,” Ethan said, “we can’t bring you home in this condition.” I was fighting to keep my eyes open. Ethan sounded as if he were far away. “Jessica will be no less worried if you were to arrive home like this.”

He’s got a point there.

I forced my eyes open again and saw Liam leaning over me. I didn’t have the energy to flinch or move away, my arms lying limp at my sides. Liam laid the back of his wonderfully cool hand against my forehead, and I turned my face toward the coolness of it, closing my eyes again.

“She’s warm,” I heard him say with some concern. “That can happen with the first few shifts too.”

“Are you certain?” Ethan sounded worried.

“The speed of time in the upper frames makes the human body work harder trying match the frequency—think of it like a very intense workout. I think her body’s just overworked. She should be fine once she’s rested.”

Everything was silent for a moment. I felt a wave of exhaustion roll over me and let my head drop to the side, not able to balance it anymore. I heard movement and fought to open my eyes. I watched as Ethan walked over to my backpack and picked it up. He dug through the front pocket and pulled out my cell phone. He keyed in my password and thumbed the screen for the briefest of seconds before holding it to his ear. I ought to have wondered how he knew my password, but the thought didn’t quite stir forth in my tired brain.

“Hello, is this Jessica? This is Ethan calling ... Elly’s friend ... yes, that’s right. I wanted to let you know what’s happening. I was about to bring Elly home, but she’s apparently not feeling well ... tired, a bit warm. I thought it would be best if she stayed here rather than having her attempt the drive home ... I understand your concern. Would it help to speak with her? One moment.” He was beside me in the same instant. “Are you able to take the phone?” he asked quietly. I nodded, but lifting the phone to my ear was like lifting a brick.

“Hi Jess,” I said in a thick voice.

“Are you all right? What on earth is going on? Are you really staying the night there?” I winced, Jess’s voice stomping on my headache and sending sparks flying behind my eyes. The barrage of questions continued for a moment or two before Jess stopped, waiting for an answer.

“I’m really tired and I don’t feel well,” was all I could come up with. “I’ll just stay here on the couch.” Honestly, to my muddled brain the plan sounded perfectly reasonable.

“I’ll come get you,” Jess stated. “Where are you?”

“No, Jess, I don’t want you to do that. I just need to rest. It’s getting late and I’d really rather just stay. Ethan’s here. He’ll help me if I need anything.”

Especially since it's apparently his job to look after me.

"Elly, this is insane. I"

"Listen Jess," I interrupted—I needed to end this conversation and put the phone down—now. "I know why I haven't been sleeping well. Trust me, I'm fine here." There was a long silence on the other end as Jess processed the information.

"I'll expect an explanation tomorrow," she finally said slowly and with meaning. "I'll meet you at the bike rack before classes. And keep your phone handy," she added sternly. "Call me anytime in the night if you need me."

"Thanks Jess, but I'm sure I'll be fine. I just need to get some sleep."

"Fine. I'll see *you* tomorrow," Jess replied in a disgruntled tone.

"Yeah, bye, Jess."

Ethan took the phone before I could lower it from my ear. My hand felt like lead and I let it drop to my side as I let my head sink back into the sofa. Ethan thumbed the screen and tucked the phone into his back pocket. He turned to Theo.

"Theo, would you please check on Jessica? I want to make certain she's in no danger. Shift up and mind you're not followed." Theo nodded and was out the door before Ethan's words had worked their way through my swampy brain. He turned to me then. "We have extra rooms upstairs. Do you think you can make it?"

I wasn't so sure about that—I felt like a marionette—the kind with all their joints weighted with lead. "I'll try."

Ethan offered me his hand and I took it, but I had to work to do it. I felt the now-familiar jolt rush up my arm. My heart stuttered and my hand burned. I winced and felt my hand slip from his just a fraction. He quickly tightened his grip and held my hand more firmly.

It was only through great effort that I was able to get to my feet. Even with Ethan steadying me, I swayed on shaky knees, not quite able to find my centre of balance.

"You'll never make it up the stairs," Ethan said, a frown on his face. Before I knew what happened, he had me in his arms and was carrying me toward the stairs. I thought about protesting, but the thought didn't last long. Instead, I laid my head against his shoulder, letting my body sink into his warmth. I closed my eyes and heard the slowly rising sound of his heart beating and the steady movement of his breathing. The sounds washed over me and I was caught up in their easy rhythms. My addled brain put forward the suggestion that perhaps I could simply stay here like this—warm and safe—forever. Besides, *not* being with Ethan seemed somehow so very *wrong*.

I felt Ethan lean over and felt myself sinking into a soft bed. My heart stuttered. A scent like the bright smell of white sheets on a clothesline rose up around me.

"Elly, stop," Ethan said. "You're doing it again." Ethan's voice was sharp and much too harsh for the musings he had interrupted.

I opened my eyes with some effort. The room was dark, but I could easily see every detail of Ethan's face—including the darkening of his eyes as they turned from green to midnight blue. I knew he was waiting for me to say something but couldn't call to mind what he wanted.

"What?" I asked dully.

"You have to slow down Elly," he said gently. "You're shifting again. You mustn't do that." He turned his head toward the door. "Liam," he called, but didn't raise his voice to do it. I didn't like the anxious tenor of his voice. Like a ghost, Liam appeared beside the bed, his image hovering over me. I could see consternation come over his face as he looked down at me.

"Why does she keep *doing* that? *How* does she keep doing that?" Liam asked with some

agitation in his voice.

“I don’t know. She just drifts into it. What do we do?” Ethan asked.

“She’s exhausted. If she falls asleep, maybe she’ll come out of it. Surely she can’t shift in her sleep,” Liam said in an exasperated tone.

“I think I may be able to slow her down until she’s asleep,” Ethan said as he leaned over me. “Elly, close your eyes now,” he said gently. “Just breathe. Sleep.” His voice was soothing and inviting, but it didn’t match the worried crease in his brow. For a moment I was lost in his eyes.

So deep—such an old soul.

My weariness bore down on me. My body was caught up in the ebb and flow of Ethan’s breathing and the steady beating of his heart, and I felt like I was floating on waves washing up on the seashore. I felt the weight of a quilt being laid on top of me. Ethan sat on the edge of the bed and took my hand in both of his. A sense of déjà vu wrapped itself around me. This time I didn’t care. My eyes closed of their own accord without ever leaving Ethan’s.

The last thing I saw was Ethan’s perfect face marred with worry.

I could sense light on my face, even with my eyes closed. I didn’t open them. I didn’t want to disturb the still quiet that wrapped itself around me. No noise disrupted my unformed musings, and no movement disturbed my resting body. I lay, shapeless thoughts slowly coming together as consciousness gradually solidified into actual awareness. I still didn’t open my eyes, content to let my mind float along in a warm half-dream.

I did have the vague sense that I hadn’t moved in a very long time—my limbs felt heavy like they had become part of the bed I lay in. I rolled onto my side—mostly just to see if I could—and felt my limbs protest loudly. I moaned. Why was I so sore?

I tried to recall the previous day, but couldn’t remember what I had done or where I had been—couldn’t even remember where I was now for that matter. I remembered working in the library and then . . . nothing. I knew there was something I should be remembering—something I needed to know—something *important*. The images worried at the edges of thought, just out of sight until, suddenly, the floodgates opened and I groaned, swept away in a tsunami of memories: the creatures stalking me; a battle with swords; Ethan tall and severe; and the explanations afterward.

It’s our job to protect you.

The idea knocked the breath from me. I rolled onto my back and threw my arm across my eyes, ignoring the pain of the movement and trying to will myself back to sleep. Maybe if I never woke up I could stay oblivious to my new reality. But it was already too late. Sleep had deserted me.

Sleep? Wait.

I slept last night. No dreams, no worries, no dread. It was the first time I had slept in, what? A week? And I thought I knew why: I knew what the problem was, and more than that, I had found the solution to that problem. Of course, there was the outstanding issue that someone—those *things* in the Bowl—wanted me dead.

Yeah, that might be a problem.

Or not. I had slept after all. That had to mean something. Maybe Liam and Theo had settled things in the bowl last night. I needed to talk to Ethan. Anxious to get some answers, I

opened my eyes, flung off the covers, and promptly stopped short.

Ethan sat in a chair beside the bed. He was watching me closely, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees and his hands clasped together. He sat silently, his mouth in a line and an expression like that of a man about to walk the plank.

I slid back in the bed, pulling the covers up and hugging a fistful of blanket to my chest. My heart skipped a beat—or two or three. Ethan looked down at the floor and drew in a slow, deep breath. He looked back up at me.

“Good morning,” he said in a quiet tone, a tight smile forming on his mouth. “I was considering waking you. You appeared restless just now.”

“How long have you been sitting there?” I asked with no small amount of unease.

“I’m not certain. A while. You were restless,” he repeated soberly. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. I was just trying to remember last night,” I said, wondering why something so significant would be so difficult to remember. Ethan’s head tilted to one side, a calculating expression on his face. His eyes narrowed.

“And *do* you remember?” he asked guardedly.

“I think so,” I said, frowning to myself. “I remember the incident in the Bowl—and what you told me afterward ... about people wanting to kill me.”

I also remember you’re only here to protect me.

I studied the blanket, unable to meet his steady gaze. I listened for the sound of his heart or breathing, but couldn’t hear either of them. That didn’t seem right, and I frowned. I glanced back up at Ethan.

He considered me a moment then nodded slowly. He sighed and looked down for a moment before lifting his cerulean eyes up to meet mine.

“How are you feeling this morning? You appeared to sleep better last night.”

“How did you know that? I mean, how do you know I haven’t been sleeping?”

“We’ll get to that. It’s a long explanation. Did you sleep well?”

“Yeah. I did,” I answered, a little bewildered. I watched as his eyes lightened, turning a blue-green.

“Good,” he said quietly, continuing to hold my gaze. He looked down then stood and picked up a neatly folded stack of clothes lying at the foot of the bed. Handing the bundle to me he explained, “Liam took the liberty of obtaining a few items of your clothing and your personal effects.”

I automatically reached for the stack of clothing he held out to me, recognizing my jeans and pink t-shirt. The toiletries bag that I kept in my bathroom at home was set on top of the pile of clothes.

“How on earth did he get this?” I blurted. “Did he ask Jess for them?” As grateful as I was to see my toothbrush and hairbrush, I wasn’t entirely sure if I cared how he had gotten them. I wondered vaguely what my hair looked like.

“No, they didn’t speak,” Ethan said. He paused for a moment before continuing. “I’m certain you have questions, and I promised you answers. Could we discuss them over breakfast? You need to meet Jessica by 8:20.”

I checked my watch: 7:00.

Jess will blow a gasket if I’m late.

I didn’t even want to think about it. Questions would definitely have to wait.

“Hold on,” I said as something suddenly clicked in my brain, “how did you know we get to

school at 8:20?

“Get ready, then we’ll talk,” Ethan said with a look that clearly said *non-negotiable*.

“Fine,” I said, a hint of pique colouring my tone.

“The washroom is just through here,” Ethan said, walking over to a door in the corner of the room and swinging it open. He stood waiting for me. I threw back the quilt and stood up cautiously, my limbs still stiff. Ethan kept a close eye on my progress but didn’t move from where he stood. I glanced down and saw (with no small amount of relief) that I was still in the clothes I had worn yesterday. They appeared rather worse for wear, and I was as grateful for the change of clothes as I was for my toothbrush.

“You’ll find us in the kitchen when you’re finished,” Ethan said as I began walking toward the washroom. I couldn’t tell if he meant it as a directive or an invitation. “Down the stairs at the end of the hall.”

It’s a directive.

Ethan turned and left the room, closing the bedroom door behind him. I stared after him for a moment, a tight feeling in the middle of my stomach. I forced myself to draw a breath. I turned and headed for the washroom. I brushed my teeth and took a quick shower. The hot water pelted my stiff muscles making them more cooperative. By the time I dried myself off, I felt like my old self—mostly. I toweled my hair dry as best I could and left it down so it would dry more quickly.

I hurriedly scooped my clothes up off the bathroom floor, anxious to get downstairs, and wondered once again how Liam had managed to get my things and how he had known what I needed. He would have had to be in our apartment to get the stuff.

Definitely disturbing.

I went back into the bedroom, yesterday’s clothes in hand. I glanced at the door leading out to the hall, then back at the bed. I let out an impatient breath. I dropped my pile of clothes onto the chair and rushed to make the bed. It didn’t take long—the bedclothes were barely disturbed. Maybe I actually hadn’t moved all night. I finished making the bed, grabbed my items again and hurried down the hallway toward the stairs. Some part of my brain registered the wide expanse of hallway and the innumerable doors lining each side, but I didn’t stop to investigate.

The sound of Ethan’s voice met me at the bottom of the stairs, and I headed toward it.

“You can take the Maserati,” Ethan was saying.

“Excellent!” I heard a man reply enthusiastically. “But won’t that draw a lot of attention?”

“Ironically, given the nature of your assignment, and the people you will be watching, you will blend in better with the Maserati. Meanwhile, I’ll be needing something less conspicuous on this assignment.”

I followed the voices down the hall and ducked my head in an open doorway. Ethan stood behind a heavy wooden desk surrounded by walls lined with books. Solid wooden chairs with a warm green fabric were set in front of the desk. In one corner of the room sat a large, overly stuffed chair that was just begging for someone to sit down in it with a good book and a cup of tea.

Ethan was speaking to a man who stood on my side of the desk, his back to me. The man was wearing a beige linen suit jacket and jeans, the light colour of the jacket contrasting with his tanned hands. He had a pair of sunglasses resting on the top of his head, holding back a mop of blond hair. Ethan reached across the desk just then holding out a set of car keys.

“My assignment has become considerably more involved than I had anticipated,” Ethan

explained. "I will be occupied longer than I had expected. I'll need you to report to Will when your assignment is complete."

"Yes, sir," Shades answered taking the keys.

Ethan glanced over at me then, and Shades turned to follow Ethan's gaze.

"Elly," Ethan said formally, "I'll be right with you. I can show you to the kitchen." He turned back to Shades. "Do you know where you're going?"

Ethan watched Shades, waiting for an answer. Shades only continued to stare at me. I dropped my eyes then lifted them to Ethan. He met my gaze briefly, frowned and turned back to Shades.

"Dex ...," Ethan said with a cautionary tone. Shades startled and immediately turned his attention back to Ethan.

"Yes sir?" he asked. Ethan frowned sharply at him and Shades looked down. "Sorry, sir."

"I asked if you knew where you were going," Ethan repeated.

"Oh, yes, sir. I was out that way with Nick once."

"Good. You have your orders then. Any questions?"

"No. No questions." Shades bowed his head once in Ethan's direction and left the room, casting me a quick, sideways glance on his way out. I watched him disappear down the hall and heard a distant door close.

"Sorry about that," Ethan said as he made his way to where I stood. "Just handing off some business."

"What exactly is it that you do?" I asked, my brow furrowing as I studied him curiously. Ethan thought for a second.

"We take care of people in situations like the one you now find yourself in." I opened my mouth to ask what those situations entailed, but Ethan cut me off. "I know you have questions," he said nodding, "but first, let's see about some breakfast for you." Ethan placed a hand on my back, ushering me down the hall.

"Oh, I don't want to be a bother," I said quickly. "I really don't need anything."

Ethan looked down at me, a disapproving frown on his face.

"You always neglect to eat breakfast. That won't be happening on my watch," he said firmly.

I opened my mouth to object, but closed it again. He was right—I didn't eat breakfast—but how had he known that? I was just about to ask when we reached the end of the hallway and turned the corner into the kitchen.

The room was bright and open. The sun bounced into the room through large French doors only to scatter across the floor in multi-coloured streaks, flooding the kitchen with early morning sunshine. Liam was standing at a counter behind the kitchen island. He glanced between Ethan and me then slowly and soberly inclined his head once in our general direction. He stood watching me cautiously. Theo was seated on a stool at one end of the island. He gave Liam a curious look, then turned to me.

"You say 'good morning' here, right?" Theo asked with some anticipation in his voice—like a schoolboy hoping he had given the teacher the right answer.

"Umm ... , yes, we do. Good morning," I greeted him. Theo smiled a pleased smile. I turned to Liam then. I hesitated, but pressed forward determinedly—after all, how much worse could this get? "Good morning," I said to Liam. He startled, his gaze darting to Theo and then to Ethan. Ethan nodded but said nothing. I looked between the two of them, and when Liam only stood silently watching me, I took a breath and continued. "Thanks for getting my stuff," I said,

holding up the pile of clothes in my hands and waiting for Liam to respond. He stared at me for a moment, appearing for all the world like a deer caught in a car's headlights.

"Uh, sure," he finally replied quietly, turning his eyes away. "No problem. Ethan asked me to get them." I turned to Ethan in time to see him and Liam exchange glances.

"How did you manage—"

"I can take those," Ethan interrupted, reaching for the stack of clothes. A warm jolt shot up my arm as our hands accidentally came in contact. It made my stomach tighten and my heart stutter then speed up. In the same moment I heard several heartbeats—I didn't know whose. I drew a sharp breath.

Ethan raised his eyes to mine. Surprise flickered across his features followed immediately by a frown as his brow drew down. I watched his eyes change from sky blue to a deep jade colour. He looked down and away, then turned and quickly walked off with my clothes in his hands, leaving me staring after him.

What was that?

I turned back to Liam and Theo in confusion. Theo watched Ethan walk away, then turned to me.

"*Daelu lawr*. Take it easy," Theo amended. "You're doing it again," he cautioned.

"I beg your pardon?" I asked. Maybe my mind was a little fuzzy from that jolt.

"You shift too easily," he said, a contemplative expression on his face. "You'll have to learn to control that. It's dangerous for you to be doing that—especially if you're not in control of it." I looked at Theo for several seconds, still wondering what the jolt had been and trying to attach some sort of meaning to the words that had come out of his mouth. It wasn't working.

Liam turned from his task at the far counter, and I smelled the familiar, warm aroma of toast. He looked over at me, his brow creasing. "Did she shift again?"

"Yeah." Theo said warily.

The two of them studied me intently. I glanced between the both of them then shook my head.

"I'm sorry," I began, "I don't know—"

Ethan returned just then, my backpack slung over one shoulder.

Weird, he just left.

"I put your things in here," he said setting my pack on the floor next to the island.

Okay enough already!

I shook my head and held up my hands, gesturing for everyone to stop.

"Thanks for that," I said to Ethan, "but I have no idea what's going on here. How did Liam get my things?" I asked turning to Liam. "How did you get my bag and pack it in exactly ten seconds?" I asked, gesturing to my bag. "And what the heck is shifting?" I asked, looking at Theo with some measure of exasperation.

All three of them turned to me, and I studied each of their faces in turn. They stared at me for a moment before Theo and Liam turned to Ethan. I followed their lead, pinning Ethan with a questioning look. Ethan contemplated me curiously.

"Tell me again: exactly what do you remember about last night?" he asked.

Haven't we covered this?

Ethan only stood waiting for me to answer. I let out a sharp breath. "I remember the fight

in the Bowl. You brought me here and told me those ... those ... *men* in the Bowl were after me. I wasn't feeling well so you brought me upstairs." *That* I remembered only too clearly.

"Do you remember how you got here?" Ethan asked, his eyes narrowing.

"Yeah, sure. I ...," But I couldn't remember—my mind was blank. I tilted my head, looking at Ethan, trying desperately to fill in the blank spaces. I failed. I thought for a minute longer: still nothing. I shook my head. "No, actually, I guess I don't," I choked out, my heart picking up pace. The three men exchanged uneasy glances. I tried to breathe but couldn't suck in enough air. Suddenly I heard the mixed rhythms of several heartbeats.

"Hey! Stop that! *Nei!*" Theo admonished.

I stared blankly at him.

"Elly," Ethan said in a quiet tone, drawing my attention, "calm down. There's a reason you can't remember. I can explain, but you need to slow down first. Just breathe."

I obediently pulled air into my lungs. My muscles relaxed marginally, and I pulled in another breath.

"Please tell me what's going on," I said, quietly, barely able to get enough air to speak.

"I think it would be best to start at the beginning," Ethan said.

Chapter 6: The Realities of Time

“Ironically, time is at a premium today, so you eat, I’ll talk,” Ethan directed, ushering me to a tall stool beside the kitchen island. I glanced at my watch. We would have to leave in a few minutes if I was going to meet Jess on time. Ethan got a cup from the cupboard and, turning back to the island a fraction of a second later, set down a steaming cup of tea. Along with it, he handed me a plate of warm, buttery toast that smelled like a sleepy Saturday morning.

I arched one eyebrow at him.

“That was quick,” I said in a tone that was really more of a question.

Ethan only nodded.

“Is this sufficient or would you prefer something else? We still have a little time, I could”

“No,” I said, interrupting him, “this is fine. I’m not very hungry anyway.”

“Regardless, if you want me to explain things, you have to eat,” Ethan said, indicating the toast.

I cast him my best *you-can’t-be-serious* look. He met that with an *I’m-perfectly-serious* look and gestured to the toast again. I rolled my eyes, but picked up the toast—I wanted information after all. I met Ethan’s gaze squarely as I shoved a large bite of the toast into my mouth. His eyes narrowed as he shook his head lightly.

“We don’t have a lot of time,” he began, evidently satisfied that I was eating as directed, “so I’ll just give you the basics for now.” His tone was that of a sergeant briefing his troops.

Ethan put his hands on his hips, looked down at the floor, and took a deep breath. He raised his head then and cast Theo a sideways glance. Theo frowned and shook his head. Ethan turned back to me, one corner of his mouth twisted down, and a determined expression in his cadet blue eyes.

“The reason you don’t remember coming here last night is because, technically, it didn’t happen—at least, not in *your* time.” I stared blankly at him and tried to swallow the bite of toast I was still working on—with no small effort. “Try to remember,” Ethan continued patiently. “Do you recall running from the Bowl?”

I forced the lump of toast down my throat and it sank heavily in my stomach. My brow furrowed as I studied the top of the island. Like some vague recollection of an ill-defined dream, a hazy memory of running rose up in my mind. I nodded slowly.

“And do you remember arriving here—or perhaps stopping in a country field?”

Suddenly the picture came into focus and the previous evening blazed into my mind like a film projector being switched on in a blackened theatre. I exhaled sharply and felt the blood drain from my face. I felt cold as my pulse slowly hammered loudly in my temples.

“Just stay calm,” Ethan said quietly as he held up one hand. “Breathe,” he prompted.

I sucked in a breath, my eyes never leaving his. My heartbeat settled into a calmer rhythm.

“Better?” Ethan asked.

“Better,” I said.

Ethan nodded.

“I’m not entirely certain how to explain this” He shook his head and was silent for a moment, a contemplative expression on his face as he studied the floor. He looked back up at me. “Don’t forget your breakfast,” he said and stood, waiting. I took a sip of tea (two sugar, no cream—of course). Ethan nodded once, then continued. “Do you remember our conversation about your time calculations?”

“Of course,” I said, toast in hand, halfway to my mouth. I remembered every word he had ever spoken to me.

He doesn’t need to know that.

Ethan placed both hands on the island, leaning toward me.

“What if time isn’t linear?” Ethan asked, watching my face intently. “What if it’s more like a sphere? And what if there were more than one sphere—more than one layer. Like a ball within a ball.”

“One layer of time moves outward to another?” I asked, trying to make his idea of time fit into mine.

“No, not continuing from each other—separate and distinct layers. The layers never meet.”

“What’s in the middle and on the outside of the ball?”

“Nothing? Everything? A vacuum perhaps?” he conjectured, shrugging his shoulders.

“*Eliff mors*,” Theo muttered. Ethan shot him a frown and Theo looked down. I ignored that and turned back to Ethan.

“You’re implying that there’s more than one layer of time in existence?” I asked Ethan skeptically, my eyebrows lifting.

“I am. These different times don’t intersect, but they are linked in a way—they have a common point of reference. Your formula described one layer of time—a linear one. To describe any other layer, you must adjust for the area of a sphere—time isn’t just a line. That’s the part of the calculation you were missing.”

I nodded my head slowly, seeing the equation in my head.

“Okay, I get it,” I said, considering. “But what’s the common reference point?”

“Well,” Ethan began, leaning his elbows on the island and speaking quickly, flecks of green colouring his eyes. I had to pay attention to keep up. “That’s where the time expansion theory comes in. Picture a bicycle wheel with two layers of wheel, the spokes moving from the centre through both wheel layers. It ought to be a sphere, but thinking two dimensionally will make this easier to explain. If you watched one spoke of the wheel as it moved, the outer wheel—or in this case, the outer layer of time—would have to move further and faster to keep up with the inner layer—for the spoke to remain in place. The outer layer would appear to move faster if you were on the inside layer looking outward and the inside layer would appear to move more slowly if you were looking at it from the outer layer.” He studied me, waiting, as I processed the information.

“So the speed of time would depend on which layer you were in?”

“Exactly,” Ethan said with a small smile.

“Okay, I get it, but what does that have to do with getting here yesterday?” I took another bite of my toast.

“What if this wasn’t just a theory? And what if other places existed in those other layers of time?” He paused, a sober expression on his face now. I swallowed hard.

“Okay, go on,” I said warily.

“From your time layer—from your frequency of time—you wouldn’t know anything about the other layers. You wouldn’t be able to see or hear anything in them because they would be

completely out of sync with your time. Some frequencies would be moving too fast to be seen, others would be moving so slowly that the pieces would never connect for you and you wouldn't notice them. All of the layers would exist while moving at separate speeds—frequencies. To you—that is to a *normal* person—it would be as though the other layers didn't exist.” He stopped, waiting again.

My stomach lurched like I was on some sort of amusement ride.

“So ... you're trying to tell me that everything I saw last night—everything out *there* ... ,” I said pointing toward the front of the house, “was in another time? Like time traveling?”

“You're partly correct. The things you saw last night—the trees, the other country lane—exist in another frequency of time. You're incorrect, however, in thinking they are in the past. All of those things exist now. Everything you saw and heard still exists at this moment only in another layer of time that we cannot experience from this layer.”

“So ... , how could I see them then?”

“Somehow you got into the other layer of time,” Ethan said, his brows drawing together as he shook his head. “This house exists only in the human time frequency. You couldn't see it when you were in the other frequency—the *cian* layer of time. When I had you slow yourself down you returned to the *human* frequency and could see the house.” His voice grew anxious, “Elly, you need to understand that it is very dangerous to cross into other frequencies.”

“I'll try to avoid that,” I answered sarcastically as I arched one eyebrow at Ethan. I was having difficulty wrapping my head around this concept, and frankly, I was still questioning both my sanity and Ethan's, but what other explanation was there for everything that had happened yesterday—or even today for that matter? I shelved disbelief for the time being and asked: “So those ... *things* that were after me in the Bowl: where do they fit in your time theory? Are they from another frequency of time?”

“No, not from the other time frequency. They exist in the human frequency, although they are able to change how they move within your time. It's like shifting gears on a car. They can move faster or slower within human time. Those creatures have shifted to the uppermost time frame in your frequency, essentially allowing them to move extremely quickly. Humans generally can't see anything in that fast of a time frame.”

“So if we can't see them when they're moving that fast, how come I could see them in the Bowl?”

“I don't know,” Ethan said, looking at me soberly. He took a breath. “You should not have been able to. Not from a normal human time frame—or speed. You should not be able to see them unless you are also shifted to the same frame as they are. No one can see the frames higher than the one they're in—not even *cians*.”

“*Cians*?”

“That's what we call the people who inhabit the frequency above yours—*my race of people*.”

“*Your race*?!”

Ethan nodded, but said nothing, only narrowing his eyes as he studied me intently. I watched his eyes darken, and the puzzle pieces spun in my mind, another piece falling into place. My insides rebelled, the half slice of toast I had eaten sitting like a barely contained rock in my stomach.

“You're from another layer of time?” I asked reluctantly. I already knew what he was going to say. The thought squeezed my chest and I couldn't breathe. Ethan remained silent. I quickly lifted my eyes to his.

Ethan looked down at his folded hands for a long moment. I heard him sigh heavily. He lifted his gaze to mine and I watched as his eyes turned a deep midnight blue. I shook my head and looked away.

He doesn't even exist here.

My throat felt tight and my eyes stung as I fought back tears.

“And both of you too?” I asked in a plaintive whisper glancing between Theo and Liam. I tried not to let my face crumple. Neither of them answered—Theo only stared at me and Liam studied the floor. I turned back to Ethan. Ethan nodded slowly, watching me intently.

“Essentially, yes,” he finally said, “although Liam is unique in that regard.”

I closed my eyes and shook my head, not wanting any of this to be true.

“So you’re telling me that none of you should exist for me?” I asked disbelievingly, trying to sort the truth from the insanity that Ethan was attempting to explain to me. My thoughts spun in circles. This stuff just wasn’t possible. Was it? I didn’t want it to be possible, especially where Ethan was concerned. And yet, it made very real sense in a weird sort of way.

The idea washed over me again, pulling me down in an undertow of mental rebellion. I fought to keep breathing—fought to keep my bearings. After a few moments of untangling my jumbled thoughts, I collected myself, taking a steady breath.

Ethan remained silent.

“Well,” I said with a calm I wasn’t certain I felt, “I suppose that explains a few things.” I laughed hollowly, prompting a concerned look from Ethan. “It all makes sense now—even my stupid formula works.” I sat in silence for a moment then asked, “Why me? Why are those things chasing me?”

“We’re not entirely certain,” Ethan said, his brow furrowing as he shook his head. “We believe it has something to do with your ability to shift—to move more quickly within your frequency. We call it *fara horocius* in our language. It means something more like ‘to quicken’.”

“Me?! I shift in time?!”

With an *isn't-it-obvious* expression on his face, Ethan said, “Your reflexes, your ability to anticipate things, and your ability see into upper frames? Yes, you shift in time. All of the skills you have been trying to conceal from the other humans around you indicate some sort of latent ability.”

“I can’t actually do those things on purpose, you know ... but even if I could, why would they care if I can catch things quickly or know what the Prof is about to say?”

Ethan turned to Liam then, and I followed his gaze. Liam regarded Ethan soberly then turned and studied me for a moment before speaking.

“The creatures chasing you are called chaeli. I” He stopped mid-sentence and cast Ethan a desperate look before lowering his gaze to the floor. He was silent for a moment then, after taking a breath, lifted his eyes to mine. “They were sent after you by their leaders: Corbett and Delano. We’re not really sure what they want. Maybe they think your skills would be useful to them, but given the attempts to kill you, I think they see you as a threat. Either way, they were sent to do whatever they had to do to” Liam paused. All sound and movement appeared to stop. I swallowed hard as Ethan watched my face intently. I glanced between the three men who stood watching me with grim faces. I forced in a breath.

“And that’s where you guys come in?” I asked. Ethan nodded. He gestured to my forgotten toast and I obediently shoved another bite into my mouth.

“We—that is a group of cians—have monitored the chaeli’s activities in the human

frequency for a very long time. There isn't time to explain properly, but essentially, it is our responsibility to protect both humans and our own people from the chaeli. Liam became aware of the chaeli's interest in you and asked for our help. Liam and I have been watching you for a number of ...," he paused for a second, his brows drawing together. "... *months* now."

"What's a 'month'? Theo asked Liam quietly.

"It's 30 days—give or take," Liam explained.

"You mean they actually *count* them?" Theo asked, frowning quizzically. He caught Ethan's silencing glance. "Sorry," he said sitting back on his stool.

"So you *have* been following me," I said, casting Liam an icy glare. Liam regarded me cautiously and nodded silently, his gaze holding mine.

Well, at least you're not insane—probably not anyway.

"I'm sorry, Elly," Ethan said matter-of-factly. "At first we followed you just outside of your time frame until, at some point, something changed. You started to see us even though we stayed in the higher frames. I have to confess to some surprise when you told me you had seen me in chemistry class. I hadn't been in your time frame during that class. We hadn't anticipated that. We had to change our tactics making our surveillance work that much more difficult. I shifted down to follow you to classes so you wouldn't appear to be talking to people who didn't exist."

"I couldn't see the chaeli from human frames," Ethan continued, "and they were only one step behind us at every turn. We were able to fend off a number of attempts on your—" he stopped abruptly, casting me an apologetic look. "We stopped a number of attacks," he amended. "At first their attacks were indirect and done from a higher time frame, making them difficult to anticipate. Your tumble down the hill, the pile of rocks, the evening in the park—those were all due to their influence. But they are becoming bolder, more aggressive. They are no longer concerned with concealing their presence from you as evidenced by last night's attack. It would seem they have become desperate. We were chasing those two all day. The chaeli are getting better."

"Yeah, that was great," Theo said, chuckling quietly.

I arched one eyebrow at him and he grinned at me.

This is insane.

"So ... , let me see if I've got this straight: other worlds existing in another time layer; being chased by creatures from human time; and being protected by people who don't exist." Theo and Liam laughed. A quick grin crossed Ethan's face, but he quickly suppressed it as he nodded. "Doesn't really inspire confidence," I said flatly.

Ethan scrutinized my face as he tilted his head.

"You seem to be taking this rather well," he said, his cerulean eyes narrowing somewhat.

"Not really," I replied with a casual shake of my head. "I'm just playing along until I wake up." Ethan nodded in understanding. "So what am I supposed to do now?" I asked.

"Right now," Ethan said, moving around the island and picking up my backpack, "we need to leave if you want to meet Jessica on time."

I reflexively glanced at my watch: 7:50.

"Just one thing," Ethan said turning to Theo. "Theo, would you ask father to meet me here? I need to speak with him."

Theo sobered and stared at Ethan for a moment as though Ethan had just handed him a live hand grenade.

“*Hinome?*” Theo asked, worry pulling down his brow. Ethan only nodded solemnly. “Okay ...,” Theo said with a great deal of uncertainty. Theo stood to leave, the troubled expression on his face deepening.

“Thank you, Theo,” Ethan said, then turned to Liam. “We’ll meet you on campus.”

Liam nodded.

“You’re not coming with us?” I asked Liam.

“I’ll meet you there,” he answered. He glanced up at me briefly, then looked away.

I picked up my empty cup and took it to the sink. I washed it out quickly and turned to find a towel, but Ethan was already there, towel in hand. He took the cup from me, dried it and replaced it in the cupboard. I watched his movements—graceful and effortless—every action in sync with some internal beat, precisely timed. I could virtually hear the rhythm to which he moved now that I was paying attention. How could I have missed that before?

We left Liam sitting at the island and made our way to Ethan’s garage. I think my mouth actually dropped open when I took in the long line of assorted vehicles, my footsteps echoing down the expanse of the cool garage. All of the vehicles struck me as being very expensive and very shiny.

Ethan led me over to a candy apple red ‘65 Mustang—this one I knew. My uncle had one once. If I hadn’t known better, I would have said this one had been made yesterday. I ran my hand along the cool surface of the fender, gazing into the deep layers of colour gleaming in the overhead light. Ethan opened the passenger door and waited for me to get in. I looked up at him.

“Didn’t I hear you say you needed something less conspicuous? This doesn’t exactly fit into that category you know.”

“Why not?” Ethan asked. He regarded me with a confused expression then turned to study the car. “It’s just an old car. I bought it a while ago and have had it “forever”, to use a human colloquialism.”

“I’m sure you’re right,” I laughed, “but now it’s a classic—and in mint condition at that. A lot of people would give their right arm for one of these.” Ethan cast me a horrified expression. “Sorry—human colloquialism. My point is: people will certainly notice this car.”

“How can you humans possibly change cars so fast?” Ethan asked, frowning. “Fine, which one would you suggest?” he asked in a disgruntled tone, closing the door to the Mustang.

I surveyed the row of vehicles. Every last one of these would stand out. I briefly considered the motorcycle in the corner—considered how much fun it would be to ride—but even that appeared expensive and would definitely attract attention.

“Sorry,” I said, “but if you’re going for subtle, none of these will work. We could go get my car. No one would look twice at it.”

“I’ve seen your car,” Ethan said straightforwardly, his eyes catching mine. “Not happening. Next.” He folded his arms across his chest and squared his shoulders.

“Okay, okay. No need to be nasty.” I studied the line up of cars again. “This one,” I said pointing to a silver sedan. It had a row of rings for an insignia and looked expensive, but at least it wasn’t a sports car.

“Fine,” Ethan said, just a little perturbed. He dug in the pocket of his jeans and pulled out a different set of keys. He clicked the locks open with a solid, echoing *thunk* and held the door open while I got in. He went around the car and slid into the driver’s seat

“Better?” he asked, a touch of humour in his eyes.

“Marginally,” I shot back with a smirk.

Ethan grinned. He pulled out of the garage, the large door silently falling shut behind us, and guided the car through traffic. We drove for a while without talking, but my brain was working overtime trying to make sense of what was going on. Mostly my thoughts circled around the idea that Ethan didn't belong in my time—he was only here to do his *job*. The idea stuck in my chest, making it difficult to swallow.

The puzzle pieces swirled in my head for a time before two of the pieces suddenly did a bob and wheel and fell together. Ethan had said it was dangerous to go into another time frequency. He had also said he didn't belong in this one.

“You're too quiet. What are you thinking?” Ethan asked in a gentle tone. The soft texture of his voice wrapped around the back of my neck making my shoulders settle into the soft, cool leather of the seat. I took a deep breath. Ethan cast me a sideways glance.

I had to look away when I answered, ostensibly turning to study the scene outside my window.

“You said shifting to another frequency is dangerous.”

“It has risks, yes.”

“And it's not risky for you? I mean you're in my frequency so isn't it as risky for you to be in my frequency as it would be for me to be in yours?” I put the pieces together out loud. I wanted to make certain I wasn't missing anything. As each piece fell into place my stomach dropped, my voice becoming quieter. When Ethan didn't say anything, I looked over at him. “So it's dangerous for you to be here,” I whispered, not truly wanting him to answer.

Ethan's lips pressed together and he sighed heavily. He lifted his eyes to mine and I almost fell into their inky depths. My heart stuttered then started beating more quickly. Ethan turned away.

“Yes, it's dangerous for me to be here,” he finally admitted.

“Why is it dangerous?” I asked quickly. “What happens?”

Ethan cast me a quick glance before answering.

“Shifting frequencies is relatively new to us. We're still studying it and we don't have all the answers yet. We do know that humans or cians who enter the other frequency weaken and eventually die. Our theory is that a body out of its time cannot physically adjust to the difference in speeds and simply wears out as it continuously tries to make that adjustment.”

“They *die*?” I asked in dismay. “How long can someone be in another frequency before they ... get sick ... die?” It was difficult to say the word out loud as though saying it might make it happen.

“Hours, days, weeks, months—if my human terminology is correct,” Ethan said, shrugging his shoulders and shaking his head. “We don't know. It varies. Some die within ... hours, others within ... years—humanly speaking. It appears some are more susceptible to the time difference than others.”

“But you've already been here for a while. You're not sick yet?”

“I don't think so,” he said, seeming to consider this for a moment. “I'm told a person weakens gradually.” His voice trailed off slightly at the end as a slightly troubled expression clouded his features.

“But if you get weak you could just shift back, couldn't you?” I asked with a hint of desperation.

“Some have become too weak to shift back before they knew they were in danger. They couldn't get back.” His voice was quiet as he spoke and his expression somber. He didn't look at me, only narrowed his eyes as he drove. That statement hit me like a glass of cold water

thrown in the face of a sleepwalker.

“Then you need to go home,” I choked out. “You can’t stay here,” I tried again urgently. I still had trouble getting the words out.

“We won’t leave until you’re safe. You can’t protect yourself from the chaeli,” Ethan said, shaking his head emphatically.

I barely heard what he said. All I could think was how dangerous it was for him to stay here and how terribly wrong it would be for him to leave. How could I lose this? But I would lose it, one way or another. Ethan glanced over at me then back to the road.

“Elly,” he said in a cautionary tone, “you’re thinking again ...,” He cast me an expectant look, but I turned away, studying the view outside the window again.

There was no way I was going to tell him what I had been thinking. Where my freakishness had failed to send him running, telling him I wanted him to stay with me would certainly do the job. I fought back my more selfish thoughts, trying to say the things I didn’t want to say but knew I had to.

“Ethan,” I said, turning to him. My thoughts were derailed by the feel of his name lingering on my tongue, and it took me a moment to recall what I was about.

Oh, right—going home.

I forced myself to continue. “You have to go back to your frequency. You can’t stay until it is too late.”

“That’s not an option. You don’t understand Liam’s position. He’s risked a great deal to help you. I gave him my word that I would help keep you safe. I won’t leave him to deal with this alone. Besides, I knew the risks when I agreed to this assignment. I have done this before,” he said.

“You’ve been in human time before?”

“Of course. This isn’t my first assignment here.”

What?! Wait a minute!

“You’ve protected other girls?” I asked with a hint of alarm, my head snapping up to watch Ethan’s reaction closely.

“Other people?” Ethan asked quizzically. “Yes, numerous times. I told you: cians help people in situations like your own.”

I said nothing as I fought back the unsettled feeling in my chest. I pulled in a breath.

“Still,” I said after calming the disquiet I felt, “I can’t accept your help knowing it’s killing you—killing the three of you.”

“I won’t allow Theo to stay long,” Ethan said, shaking his head firmly, “and Liam is not in danger. His situation is different.”

“How is it different? Won’t this kill him too?”

“No, being in this frequency won’t harm him, but you will have to speak with him regarding why that is. As for myself: I’m not leaving.” He turned and leveled a stern look at me. I felt a flash of annoyance.

Stubborn.

Ethan pulled the car into a parking spot. I breathed in a deep draught of his cool scent.

One last hit before I have to get out of the car.

Ethan turned and studied me steadily for a moment before getting out of the car and

retrieving my bag from the back seat. I opened my door and got out. He was by my side instantly, my pack over his shoulder. I knew better than to ask for it back. I only closed my eyes and turned my face up to the soothing warmth of the pale fall sun as it fought its way through the cool morning air. I heard the car door close and opened my eyes to find Ethan watching me with an unreadable expression in his deep green eyes. He quickly turned away and began walking. I fell into step beside him as we made our way to the bike rack where Jess and I were to meet.

When we reached the Bowl, I could see Jess standing beside the bike rack a little way off. Liam chose that moment to materialize out of thin air. He was suddenly just *there*. I inhaled sharply and stepped back a half step like I was watching a “jump scene” in a movie. I quickly collected myself when I saw it was Liam.

“Sorry,” he said quietly, casting me a cautious glance before averting his eyes.

“You don’t have to apologize,” I said, shaking my head. “I was only startled. Where did you come from, and how did you get here so fast?” In my peripheral vision I saw Ethan scanning the area.

What is he looking for?

I turned back to Liam. Liam looked at me briefly before his eyes darted away again.

“I was in a higher frame. I ran.”

“You *ran*? And you got here before we did?” I asked incredulously.

“Yeah.” Liam grinned as he scanned the Bowl. “You probably shouldn’t be talking to me since no one else can see me—I’m still in a higher frame than the two of you.” I considered that, regarding Liam for a moment, then surveying the students walking past us. It was true, no one seemed to notice him, but then, no one was looking at Ethan or me either.

“Can you see him?” I asked Ethan. Ethan shook his head in the negative, a grin on his face. I paused for a moment, then turned back to Liam. “Prove it.” I challenged. I was momentarily distracted by Ethan’s low, quiet laugh. Just like the sound of his voice, his laughter loosened my shoulders and somehow made my breathing just a little easier—lighter.

“Seriously?” Liam asked in disbelief.

“Seriously,” I answered matter-of-factly.

Liam pressed his lips together, frowning in irritation, and narrowing his eyes. He glanced around for half a second then spotted Jess. She stood searching the area with her back toward us.

“Jessica!” Liam called loudly. Jess didn’t respond. Liam turned back to me. “Okay, now you call her.”

“Jess!” I called. Jess immediately spun around to find me. She spotted me, raised a hand briefly then started toward us. Liam turned to me with one eyebrow raised.

“Maybe she just didn’t hear you,” I said, turning back to watch Jess. Ethan chuckled and shook his head. I turned to Liam in time to see him roll his eyes before letting out an impatient huff.

“Fine,” Liam said, a determined cast to his voice. Liam walked toward Jess at a quick pace. He stopped a few steps in front of her, standing directly in her path, his arms folded across his chest. Jess didn’t break stride. She just walked straight into Liam’s uncompromising form—no hesitation. In the very instant she collided with Liam, he stepped off to the side so quickly I couldn’t follow the movement. Jess faltered, and tottered forward like one of those old weebles toys, her arms outstretched. I reached out a hand instinctively as though I could steady her from where I stood. I needn’t have bothered. Liam’s hand was already on her shoulder, bracing her until she found her footing again. As soon as she had her feet under her, Liam dropped his hand and was by my side in the same instant.

“Satisfied?” Liam asked, a perturbed frown on his face. I didn’t turn to look at him, instead keeping a close eye on Jess. She was clumsy enough without any extra help.

“On that point, yes,” I said quietly, “but there’s one other thing”

“What now?” Liam asked in dismay. Jess was close enough to hear me so I didn’t answer.

“Hey, Jess,” I said easily.

“Hi Elly,” Jess said, smiling sheepishly. “Guess I kind of klutzed out there huh?” She checked back over her shoulder then turned to me, a confused frown crumpling her brow. She shook her head. “Feeling better this morning?” she asked, one eyebrow arched.

“Much better,” I said, nodding. “I was just really tired I guess. Haven’t been sleeping well,” I said by way of explanation. “Jess, this is Ethan. Ethan, Jess.” Ethan offered Jess his hand and she shook it briefly.

“Hi Ethan, it’s nice to meet you—finally,” Jess added, turning to give me an accusatory look.

“It’s good to meet you,” Ethan said. “I’m sorry for last evening. I honestly didn’t feel Elly was up to the trip home.”

“Well, I suppose it worked out all right,” Jess said with some reservation as she studied Ethan warily. “You’ve been quite a help to Elly recently.” I cringed at the suspicious tone in her voice and quickly looked over at Ethan. If he noticed the tenor of Jess’ words he didn’t acknowledge it.

“I’m glad to help in any way I can,” Ethan replied evenly.

I remembered what I was about then and briefly caught Liam’s eye. His expression turned wary. Turning back to Jess I said, “I was going to introduce you to Ethan’s friend, Liam, but he seems to have utterly disappeared.” I cast a surreptitious glance at Liam as Ethan coughed trying to cover another laugh. Liam shook his head at me, muttering something I couldn’t quite hear—I only caught the word “humans” spoken none too politely.

Liam moved quickly to a stand of bushes and casually emerged on the other side of them as though he had simply been walking there the entire time. I waited anxiously for him to reach us. My point was this: Jess hadn’t seen him before, but could she *ever* see him? I could be crazy for all I knew—seeing people who didn’t exist. But then, she could see Ethan. I glanced over at Ethan. He was still fighting a smile. Liam walked up to us and stopped beside me. Jess immediately looked up at him, a slight smile on her face.

“Well, here he is now,” I said, my words dripping with feigned surprise. Liam frowned, but I ignored him. “Liam, this is my sister, Jess. Jess, this is Ethan’s friend, Liam.” I only just caught Liam’s surprised expression before he straightened his face and turned to Jess.

“Hello Jessica,” Liam said as they shook hands.

“Nice to meet you,” Jess responded, still smiling politely.

Okay, at least I’m not crazy.

“Jess, we really need to get to class and so do you. I don’t have any labs today, so I’ll be finished after my Biochem class. How is your schedule for today?” I asked.

“Pretty light. I’ll be home early too. I guess I’ll see you after lunch then?” She glared at me, her voice heavy with meaning.

Her words said “see” you after lunch, but her expression said “interrogate”.

“Yeah, see you later,” I answered reluctantly. Jess nodded, as she studied me for a second. She turned and walked back toward the Arts building. I turned to Liam—only Liam wasn’t there. I looked at Ethan.

“Where’d he go?” I asked.

“He went to find an inconspicuous place to shift into a higher frame—one of us has to watch for chaeli, and I can’t do that from this frame.”

Oh.

“Okay then, I’ll ask you,” I said. “There’s something I don’t understand. I thought you said people couldn’t manipulate our world while they’re in another time? I thought the worlds weren’t connected.” I gave Ethan a confused frown.

“They’re not,” he replied, shaking his head.

“Then how could Liam make Jess trip if he was in another frequency?”

“He wasn’t in another *frequency*. He was simply several time frames higher in *this* frequency. We can’t manipulate your *frequency* from ours. We can, however, use time differently than you humans do while remaining in the human frequency. We can adjust our speed frame by frame, staying just outside of human sight and hearing. The humans don’t know we’re present if we’re moving too quickly for their senses to detect. Think of light or sound waves. They move too fast for your senses to pick up, but you can still feel their effects. It’s the same with us. We can also slow down enough to interact with humans—like I’m doing now with you and Jessica. Although,” he looked momentarily puzzled, “that doesn’t seem to be strictly necessary where you are concerned.”

“So ... , what does that mean? Why can I see and hear you when you’re not in my frame?”

“I have absolutely no idea.”

I frowned to myself at that, then turned and watched Jess as she walked away. An unwelcome moment of disquiet twisted my stomach. What on earth was I going to tell Jess?

“Houston, we have a problem.”

Chapter 7: Humans and Cians

I stood watching Jess' retreating form as she marched away, puzzle pieces circling in my head. I was thinking about Theo's objections last night: I wasn't supposed to know about any of this. I assumed that went for Jess too. I was also thinking about Jess' aversion to my unique talents—the same talents these cians had called “skills”. As I was laying down my thoughts one by one and trying to figure out what cards I had left in my hand, I pulled out a wild card: Jess' ability to grasp what was going on. Oh, there was no doubt she was smart enough to understand the concepts, but would she *get* it?

“You're going to be late for class,” Ethan informed me. I stared blankly at him for a moment, my mind refusing to leave off unfinished thinking. After a moment, the house of cards I was carefully constructing in my head collapsed, leaving me with no answer to the problem of how to explain things to Jess. I gathered up my disheveled thoughts and replayed Ethan's comment in my head then checked my watch. I felt a familiar tightness in my chest—a slight panic at the idea that time had moved on and left me behind. I nodded up at Ethan then started walking to class with Ethan close beside me. I glanced back over my shoulder, but Jess had already disappeared from sight. I frowned.

“Jess will be expecting an explanation when I get home. What do I tell her?” Ethan didn't answer immediately so I took the opportunity to plead my case. “If she's in danger because of me I need to tell her what's happening. Besides, she may be able to help.”

He paused considering this, his brow creased.

“I doubt she could be of much help under the circumstances—she doesn't shift—*at all*. Besides, there are issues with telling Jessica about the situation. First, telling humans about cians contravenes several cian rules. That poses significant difficulties for me. However, since I have already broken those rules on this assignment” He looked at me with discontent situated firmly in his dark, sea-green eyes. “Second,” he continued, “humans do not generally take well to cians. They don't want to know there are other worlds or other people beyond their own. They most certainly do not want to know these other people can do things they cannot. It frightens them. Well, *most* of them,” he amended, casting me a sideways grin and wreaking havoc with my focus. He sobered as he continued to study my face, a melancholy shadow darkening his eyes.

“There have been incidences in which human involvement with cians has brought considerable harm to everyone concerned.” Ethan winced at that before he continued. “It's always a risky venture. As a result, we are forbidden to appear in human time unless we disguise ourselves as one of you. Telling you about cians and the cian frequency was a grave infraction of our law, however seemingly unavoidable it was. I am not convinced it would be in Jessica's best interest to tell her about us. I am not convinced it was in *your* best interest for that matter. It may ultimately do more harm than good.”

“I don't know . . . Jess has always stood by me—ever since we were kids. It seems wrong not to have her help me now,” I objected. Ethan glanced at me.

“What do you think her reaction would be if you were to tell her?” he asked. I thought

about that. The mental image of a nuclear meltdown flashed briefly across my mind.

“I honestly don’t know,” I said pensively. “She already knows I’m a freak. Maybe it wouldn’t be so much of a stretch for her to know I’m a slightly bigger freak than she assumed. But”

“But ... ?” Ethan prompted.

“Well, you’re right,” I frowned, “she’s never been comfortable with the things I can do. I think it frightens her sometimes.” Ethan nodded silently. “What happened the other times—when humans were involved with cians?”

Ethan stopped walking and turned to me. He measured me for a moment the way I imagined a doctor looks at a patient just before telling him he only has a week to live. I watched as Ethan’s eyes deepened to a sapphire blue. He sighed then continued walking slowly.

“A number of incidents come to mind,” he said in a somber tone. “One of them happened a very long time ago for humans but more recently for us. We sent scouts to the human frequency to keep an eye on chaeli activity”

“Wait,” I interrupted, “you said it’s your *job* to help us. So is there like, a cian army? Are you a soldier in it?”

“I suppose you could think of it that way,” Ethan responded. “And, yes, I have a role to play in it. As I was saying,” he began again, “one of the scouts became involved with a human girl while he was in your time. Initially he appeared as a human to her in order to gather information. He suspected the chaeli were keeping her family under observation.”

“Why do the chaeli keep humans under observation?” I asked.

“Sometimes the humans are recruited to increase chaeli numbers, other times the humans are killed. We don’t know what the chaeli are trying to accomplish by that. In this case, the scout sensed the chaeli were trying to recruit the girl. He grew fond of the girl and she could shift well enough so, not aware of the risks, the scout eventually made the decision to ask the girl if she would return to cian time with him.”

“He didn’t know it was dangerous?” I asked.

“No. Few humans had crossed into the cian frequency at that time. They wouldn’t have known the dangers then. Regardless, the girl wasn’t certain she was ready to leave her family so the scout remained with her for a time in the hopes she would decide to return with him. The scout became more involved in the girl’s life, and consequently, with the girl’s family. After a time, the girl’s family noticed the unusual behaviour of her gentleman friend. They became suspicious of the scout, and soon enough, they became suspicious of the girl too. The family insisted the girl end the relationship, but she refused. The”

“Why did the family do that?” I asked, my brow furrowing. “That doesn’t seem at all right.”

“It was believed the family was trying to protect the girl. They may have sensed something was wrong with the scout or they might have been concerned about the others in the village—and rightly so. Suspicions arose, not only within the girl’s family, but also within the village, and the girl’s behaviour came under scrutiny. Rumors spread. The scout grew fearful of the villagers and their suspicions and finally convinced the girl to return with him to cian time. But things went very wrong. The villagers descended on them and brought them to “trial” as a warlock and a witch. Normally, any cian would simply have returned to our frequency, but for some reason the scout didn’t. We believe he may have been weakening by that time, or perhaps the girl couldn’t shift that well after all and he may have decided to remain with her. Whatever his reason, he didn’t return—nor did the girl. Ultimately ... ,” Ethan hesitated here and glanced at me before continuing. “Ultimately, they were both burned at the stake.” Ethan paused at my

sharp intake of breath then continued. “When the scout failed to report in, others were sent to look for him. They discovered what happened.” His eyes met mine then, filled with the double-edged pain of reluctant acceptance. “Elly, it seldom turns out well when humans become involved with cians.”

I looked at him, the troubled expression on his face sending my stomach plummeting as if in a sharp drop from the top of a roller coaster. I swallowed hard and quickly turned away.

We reached class and took our seats. Ethan set my pack down. He studied me silently as I bent to retrieve my notes.

“But couldn’t we be careful?” I asked. “I mean, wouldn’t it work if Jess and I *helped* to keep your secret? We don’t have to tell anyone.”

“Just how well has it worked for you to keep your own talents a secret?” Ethan asked, looking at me soberly.

Oh, he had to bring that up.

I frowned and nodded.

“Elly,” Ethan said quietly as I sat down, “it’s impossible to foresee all of the dangers. This is only the fourth cian generation to be involved with human time. It was only in my great-grandfather’s generation that cians discovered human time. Our knowledge base and experience with this frequency is limited. We tread carefully. We have no idea what consequences our interference with the human time might have. You can see the need to proceed cautiously.” He watched me intently as he spoke

“Yeah,” I said resignedly.

The professor came in and class was called to order. I began taking notes. Ethan sat watching me throughout the class. Out of the corner of my eye I could see—no, I could *feel*—his eyes on me. I tried to attend to the professor and my notes, but it was next to impossible. The story Ethan had told me played out in my mind in an unending loop punctuated now and then by imagined scenes of stakes and fires. My attention was so sidelined at one point, I had to ask Ethan what the professor had said. Ethan gave me a small smile, and repeated the statement for me verbatim.

Huh, and I thought he hadn’t been paying attention ...

The lecture ended and I began to gather up my things, preoccupied with thoughts of cians and humans. I felt a sudden jolt as Ethan placed a gently restraining hand on my arm just as I was about to stand up. I looked down at his hand, noting the soft, warm way it made my arm tingle and made goose bumps rise up. When he didn’t remove his hand, I looked up at him, my brows drawing together. He smiled patiently at me.

“He hasn’t finished the lecture yet,” Ethan whispered close to my ear. I felt his breath dust my cheek and I melted back into my seat. I turned my attention back to the professor, watching him work through the notes I had already written down.

Haven’t we been through this?

I sat, puzzled, waiting for the end of class. When class *actually* ended, Ethan and I stood (this time I waited for Ethan to stand first). We filed out of the building and Ethan caught my elbow as we stepped outside. I felt the now-familiar jolt shoot up my arm, only this time it tingled even more. I stopped to look up at him and he quickly took his hand away. I saw him wince and glance at his hand. He watched the other students file past us, unconsciously flexing his hand. When everyone was a sufficient distance away, Ethan turned back to me with the same

expression a father directs at a misbehaving child.

Ethan leaned close, speaking quietly. “Elly, you’ll have to be more careful about shifting like that. The anticipation, the quick movements—it could draw unwanted attention. The chaeli are searching for you. They could be any one of the people around you. They send the new ones—the ones who still appear human—to look for you and report back to them when they find you. They recognize you from your ability to shift. These ‘talents’ of yours are what brought you to their attention in the first place. Please be more careful,” he said earnestly.

“Sorry,” I said, defensively. “I’ll try, but I really can’t tell when I’m doing this stuff. I’ve never been able to. If I could control it, I wouldn’t have needed Jess to cover for me all the time.”

Ethan considered this for a moment then nodded.

“I hadn’t thought of that,” he said. “For cians shifting is just something we do—like running or breathing. We can exert control over it when there’s a need, but for the most part we don’t have to think about doing it. For whatever reason, you don’t have the same control over it. We’ll have to see if we can do something about that. You obviously can’t help being what you are, but a bit of training would certainly be prudent.” He watched me silently for several long moments then continued. “Right now, however, you need to get to English class.” He turned and began walking.

“Will you teach me sometime?” I asked hopefully. “Shifting, I mean.” Ethan turned to me, an uncertain expression on his face. I watched his blue-green eyes darken a shade, losing their green hue. A slight frown captured his mouth. “You said some training might help,” I pressed. He arched an eyebrow at me.

“You’re doing it again. Given those conversational skills you really ought to take up chess,” he remarked.

“How do you know I haven’t?” I asked. He only regarded me with a *do the math* sort of look. “Oh, right,”

“For someone who isn’t even supposed to know about us, you are becoming quite *involved*,” Ethan said with a disapproving tone. I said nothing—only gave him a sideways look and turned away again, frowning. “I’m sorry, Elly, but you were never meant to be involved—at least not in this way.”

My stomach twisted. A mental image of a plane doing a brilliant crash and burn flashed through my mind. I watched the ground as I walked, afraid of what my face would show if Ethan saw it. He came up alongside me, glancing down at me frequently. I only kept walking, stubbornly refusing to meet his gaze. It was childish, I know, but I didn’t want to force him to tell me things I didn’t want to hear—things I already knew but didn’t want to be true. Ethan sighed heavily. We walked in silence for a short distance.

“Where did Liam go?” I asked, intentionally changing the subject. Honestly, Liam seemed to appear and disappear at will like a ghost. Ethan threw me a quick glance before he turned away and spoke.

“Liam generally keeps an eye out for chaeli when I’m in class with you. I take my turn during the classes he sits in on.”

“Sounds like you two have a well-oiled machine running here,” I observed, frowning to myself over the perfunctory tone of his answer.

“We’ve been doing this for a while now,” he commented as he walked, surveying the area warily as we went.

Oh, yes—very comforting.

I arched an eyebrow at him. “Just how long is ‘a while’?” I asked guardedly.

Ethan didn’t look at me. Instead, he kept a watchful eye on the surroundings.

“I’m not really certain,” he said, frowning to himself. “It’s difficult to track human time—many days and nights anyway. We watched you for some time before you started seeing us.” When I stopped walking, Ethan turned to me, a quizzical draw to his brow.

“So . . . ,” I said hesitantly, wondering just how to phrase my question, “exactly how much time do you spend watching me each day?” I braced myself as I waited for the answer.

“We protect you every moment,” he said, his expression becoming mystified. “It’s not as if the chaeli take time off. We never know when they’ll come skulking around,” he said as if this should be obvious to me.

“Even at *night*?” I asked, appalled. I tried to think back, trying to dredge up any stupid or embarrassing things I might have done during my evenings. My heart started thumping.

“Of course.” Ethan was unapologetic.

My jaw dropped, and I gave him my most severe *you’ve got to be kidding* look.

“And just exactly *what* does night supervision entail?” I demanded.

Ethan tilted his head and studied me as confusion settled on his features.

“Well, until you began seeing us we simply shifted and stayed in your apartment—we can get to the second story window easily enough. That’s how Liam retrieved your things this morning. When you began to see us in the upper time frames, we had to stay outside and watch from a distance. That was much more difficult. It was disconcerting having to be so far away. We had to go in frequently to check on you. Easily done from a higher frame, but not so easy when you could see us in that frame. We had to wait until you were asleep.” His mouth turned down in an irritated frown.

I leveled an icy glare at him. His eyes met mine, and I watched as he paused and drew himself up. He winced and closed his eyes for a moment before he reluctantly met my harsh gaze, his eyes turning the pale blue of an early fall morning. He exhaled sharply and looked aghast, the colour draining from his face.

“I’m so sorry,” he started in quickly. “It’s not like it sounds.” He raised his hands in a gesture of surrender. “We only stayed in the living room. We would never have . . . , I mean we just needed to stay close—in case the chaeli found out where you lived. Ordinarily we would *never* have entered without your permission and we certainly would never have I’m so sorry for intruding, but under the circumstances, it was necessary.” His expression took on a guilt-stricken cast.

I stood, frowning at him while I considered his defense, debating the merits of his argument. In the end his quick admission of guilt and the tortured expression he now wore saved him. I took a deep breath.

“All right. I suppose it *was* necessary,” I admitted reluctantly. “Apology accepted. But no more spying on me—or on Jess,” I said sternly, leveling a hard look at him. “You’ll tell me when you’re around if I can’t see you.”

I heard him take a deep, shaky breath.

Had he been holding his breath all this time?

“Yes, of course,” he said with almost the same relief on his face as a person might have when the judge declares them “not guilty”. “There’s no longer any reason to stay hidden from you.” He relaxed into his usual perfect posture.

I turned and began walking again, still wondering what horrors Ethan and Liam might have witnessed in the times I assumed I was alone—I could only guess. It was no wonder Ethan

hadn't even flinched at the antics he saw in class. I realized, however, that if it came to a battle of freak show talents, Ethan, Liam, and Theo would win hands down. I seemed utterly normal compared to them. I smiled to myself.

We reached the Arts building and Ethan took my elbow, steering me off the path. He stopped, waiting until all other students had passed by.

"I have to leave," he said flatly as the tingling began to fade from the burning imprint of his hand on my arm.

He's leaving?! Now?!

My head jerked up. Almost instantly I could hear my erratic heartbeat echoed by another, slower beat. Ethan's blue eyes darted to mine. He quickly steered me to a secluded spot beside the building.

"Elly, slow down," he said as he glanced around furtively. "You *really* can't do that here," he said urgently, then continued in a tone that was likely meant to be reassuring but sounded placating to my ears. "That's not what I meant. I'm simply going to meet with my father. I will only be gone a number of ... hours then I'll return. Elly, you don't have to worry. I'm not going to leave you unprotected. Theo and Liam will remain with you. They will make certain you're safe."

I breathed then and my heart started to slow. He was wrong, of course. It wasn't my safety I was concerned about. I took another shaky breath.

"Why did you send Theo to get your father?" I asked when I could speak again.

"My father ... is in charge of these missions. I need to speak with him about this situation. We are, at present, contravening a number of cian laws. He should be made aware of what's happening. I would also like his advice. He has some experience in these matters."

I only nodded. I felt my heartbeat settle into its normal rhythm.

"You have to learn to control your shifting." Ethan frowned, concern written on his face. "It's going to get you into trouble."

Right.

Like I wasn't already in trouble? The way I reacted to Ethan—someone who would be *leaving*; evil creatures trying to kill me; trying to deal with the whole other world thing; and having to come up with some explanation for Jess. You could pick any trouble you pleased. At this point, my skills—or lack thereof—were the least of my concerns. I only nodded.

"Better?" Ethan asked.

"Better."

Barely.

Theo walked up to us just then. "Father's at the house," he said, a sober expression on his face.

"How is he?" Ethan asked, in the same somber tone as Theo.

"All right, but you probably shouldn't make him stay there longer than you have to."

"No, of course not. I'll leave right away. Liam will take over as soon as he's done patrol. In the meantime, don't let her out of your sight." Theo nodded once. "And Theo," Ethan added with a cautionary tone, "Liam has the lead while I'm gone. You probably shouldn't threaten to kill him this time." Theo chuckled and Ethan broke out into a grin, shaking his head. Ethan sobered and turned to me. He slid my backpack off his shoulder and handed it to me. "I have to go," he said solemnly.

“Sure.”

Ethan took one last look at me then abruptly turned and left. Here, in this secluded spot he didn't try to maintain a human façade, he simply sped away—very quickly. Now that I was paying attention, I thought I saw a slight shimmer in his retreating image, like heat rising off the pavement on a hot day. Then he was suddenly gone—he just disappeared. I stood, staring after him as the warmth of the sun cooled in the wake of a passing cloud. It hit me then, an uninvited thought: he was in his world and I was in mine and that was how it would be. Theo pulled me from my straying thoughts, saving me from a nasty undertow.

“Right. What are you doing now?” Theo asked, like a child asking what the next game was.

“Can I see you?” I whispered, looking around to make certain no one was witnessing me talking to my imaginary friend.

“Seriously?” Theo replied. “I can't believe you're asking me that.”

I looked at him with the same sort of expression you'd see when a teacher peers over her glasses at a disrespectful student.

“Just answer the question,” I responded flatly.

Theo rolled his eyes.

“No, you can't see me. Now what are we supposed to be doing?”

“I have English class,”

“Okay. Let's go,” Theo said. I hesitated.

“But neither Ethan or Liam ever came into this class.”

“My orders were to keep you in sight at all times,” Theo said as though that were an appropriate response to my objection.

“Suit yourself,” I said with a shrug, “but it's a small classroom.”

“Excellent,” Theo said enthusiastically, “that'll make it more fun. Lead the way.”

I had no clue what Theo meant or what he was going to do, but it sounded like he was coming to class with me. We stopped just outside the classroom door.

“Why don't you find a seat?” Theo suggested. “I'll be there in a ... *minute*?” he asked hesitantly. I nodded. He smiled proudly. His enthusiasm made me smile too. I turned and went into the class.

I sat on one of the hard plastic seats closer to the back and made sure there was an empty seat beside me. I took out my things then waited for Theo. I didn't have to wait long. Theo walked in behind some other students just as class was about to begin. I very nearly waved to him, but checked myself—for obvious reasons. I looked around at the other students. No one acknowledged Theo or made any move to avoid running into him. It was almost comical watching him maneuver around the other students in the confines of this small class and I had to stifle a laugh.

Theo hadn't gotten far when he found himself trapped in the aisle behind two girls as they chatted, unconcerned with the people lined up behind them who were trying to get to their seats. I tensed as I saw a boy coming up behind Theo, apparently intending to squeeze between the two girls to get past them. Theo looked over his shoulder at the approaching boy. He glanced back at me and grinned.

I watched in amazement then as Theo sprang effortlessly high into the air. He executed a neat back flip, slowed his decent in midair and landed on the instructor's desk at the front of the class, his feet not making a sound. I sat stunned, my mouth hanging open.

Does he have some exemption from the laws of physics?!

Theo grinned over at me. I smiled back, shaking my head. I quickly looked around to see if

anyone was watching me smile to myself. I tried to straighten my face, but a half-smile remained as I watched Theo.

And just how are you going to get down?

Theo stood on the desk watching the students mill about like a man on a desert island surrounded by circling sharks. He frowned down at the students then turned and winked at me. I watched, transfixed, as he launched himself into a mid-air somersault. He landed on a desk midway down the room then launched himself again, landing next to the wall at the end of the long table where I sat.

A girl came close to him then, intending to pass through the narrow space. Theo turned, stepped high up onto the wall, pushed off it, and propelled himself into a back flip. He landed in a crouch on the top of my table just beside me. He paused there, still grinning at me. My jaw dropped. “How . . . ,” I began, but Theo quickly covered my mouth with his hand. He cast a quick glance around while I blushed guiltily.

The boy beside me looked at me then quickly turned away. Theo took his hand off my mouth and I shook my head, grinning to myself. I looked up at Theo and silently mouthed the word “sorry”. Theo stepped lightly off the table, landing behind the empty seat I had saved for him—again, no sound.

“See,” Theo said with a smile. “More fun. Would you mind?” he asked, indicating the chair. “I could do it myself, but that usually attracts attention—you know, chairs moving on their own and all that,” he said, one corner of his mouth turning down. I pushed the chair farther away from me, ostensibly to make room for my backpack, and pulled the chair out from under the table at the same time. “Clever,” Theo said approvingly as he sat down. “Thanks. Ethan said you were quick.” He sat down and casually surveyed the room.

My curiosity burned, and I watched him for a moment, biting my lip. Then, on the top of my notepaper I scribbled, **How did you do that?** He didn’t appear to have read it, but he must have.

“What? The *neidis*—vaulting?” I nodded once. “Oh, that’s easy. You just slow down how fast gravity is pulling you. I can explain it after class.” He jerked his chin toward the front of the class. “The tutor is trying to get everyone to be quiet.” I glanced at Theo then turned my attention to the instructor.

I couldn’t pay any attention in class. My mind kept flashing to images of Theo’s fantastic leaps. It was a good thing I had already read the novel we were studying in class: *Until We Have Faces* by C. S. Lewis. My attention span was running about the length of a commercial, and I was only catching snatches of the discussion. It was like I was getting poor reception on a radio.

At one point the instructor asked me a question. I was about to plead ignorance when Theo leaned over and said: “Because Redival had always been jealous of their affection.” I repeated the answer to the class and the professor readily agreed with me. Theo fixed me with a vaguely confused look. “You need to pay attention.”

Of course I do.

I said nothing—and not only because no one else could see him, but also because I felt a warm flush stain my cheeks. I only pressed my lips together and nodded once.

Theo excused himself just as the instructor was ending the lecture. Electing to take the direct route to the door, he lightly skimmed from tabletop to tabletop being careful not to touch the students as he stepped among them. No one moved—didn’t even look up. Theo jumped off the last desk, landing in front of the door, and turned back to me.

“I’ll wait for you just outside the class,” he said.

I nodded, glancing around at the other students. Still nothing. Theo moved through the door so fast it seemed only to rattle slightly as though a change in air pressure had shaken it.

Much too surreal.

I waited impatiently for the lecture to end and for the others to file out of the classroom. It seemed everyone was moving in slow motion today and the short walk out of class felt like a mile. I heaved a frustrated sigh. I finally reached the door of the classroom and stepped into the hall. Theo was leaning against the far wall of the hallway, and I pulled in a relieved breath.

He’s still here.

It was stupid really, but he was my only link to Ethan at the moment. I could hardly have Theo disappear on me too. Wait. Could everyone see him or just me? I studied him, trying to find a clue to point me in the right direction. I didn’t find one. Theo crossed the hall and came over to me. He was studying me with the same confused expression as the one I was certain I wore at that moment.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Am I supposed to be able to see you?” I whispered, looking around furtively to see if anyone was listening.

“You still can’t tell?” Theo asked incredulously. I reluctantly shook my head. Theo’s expression said it all, but he followed that up with, “How can you not know that? Yeah, everyone can see me.” He shook his head, his forehead creasing as he studied me.

“What?” I asked. “Is that weird? Did I do something wrong?”

“Not wrong, but definitely weird. You do things no other humans do.”

I frowned and huffed lightly.

“That’s nothing new,” I said.

Theo laughed a warm-hearted laugh.

“Come on,” he said then. “I’m supposed to keep you on track.” He turned and began walking out of the building. I hurried after him.

“So how did you do that stuff in class just now?”

“Oh, right, the vaulting.” Theo paused for a moment, his brow furrowing as he thought. “It’s hard to explain—it’s like trying to explain how to walk,” he said, his voice trailing off and a frown capturing his mouth. “I suppose I can tell you why it works, but you would have to try it yourself to understand it.”

Me?! Hmmm ...

Theo turned. He held the door open for me, allowing me to step outside and onto the path, then continued as we walked slowly. “You know how gravity pulls you down a certain distance in a certain amount of time?” I nodded. “If you shift up a few frames in your frequency, you have more time in that second than a human would—the seconds are longer. That means it takes longer for gravity to pull you down the same distance. Basically I decreased the pull of gravity. Once I did that, the rest was ... *a cinch*.” He cast me a self-congratulatory grin. I laughed.

“Okay, so if I shift up into a higher frame of my own time layer—frequency, whatever—it would be like walking on the moon?”

Theo frowned at me and shrugged.

“Maybe, but you control it—you decide how much gravity affects you and when.”

“Do you think I would be able to do that?” I asked eagerly.

Theo threw me a crooked frown.
“I wouldn’t be surprised,” he said with a disapproving tone.
I smiled to myself as we made our way to the Chemistry building.

Chapter 8: A Morning with Liam

I looked up to see Liam standing beside the Chemistry building. Theo and I made our way over to where he stood. I cast a furtive glance around, and seeing no one close by, I braved a conversation.

“Hey,” I said, giving Liam a small smile. He only bowed his head in my direction. I decided to try again. “So . . . , are you visible or not?”

Theo groaned quietly.

Liam’s surprised gaze flickered up to mine briefly before he turned to Theo, a grin curving up one side of his face. He looked down, sobered, then lifted his hazy grey eyes to mine for a split second before looking away again.

“You really can’t tell where you are in time, can you?” Liam asked, more to himself than to me. One corner of his mouth flicked up, but he quickly doused the grin, still avoiding eye contact. “Yes, I’m visible,” he said, not quite controlling the grin this time.

Could I be any more of a freak?

Liam and Theo exchanged a brief update and Theo set off on patrol. Liam watched as Theo disappeared around the corner of the Arts building before he turned to me. Looking into his eyes was like peering into a deep, expansive fog—a fog where hidden things lurked. Liam tilted his head to one side for a moment then breathed deeply. He turned away.

“Okay,” I said, “so what do we do now?”

“Now,” he said matter-of-factly, “we get you to class.” Still not meeting my gaze, Liam reached for my backpack. I relinquished it without argument.

We made our way to my next class, and for the first time since I had seen Liam, I noticed people appeared to be aware of him. I had seen people watching Ethan before—mostly girls. A fact that, if I were to admit it to myself, irritated me somewhat, but this was the first time I saw anyone look at Liam—again, mostly girls.

A group of girls started giggling as we passed by—the honest to goodness twittering kind of giggle. I turned to Liam. If he had noticed them (and how could he not—that was, after all, the purpose of the giggling, wasn’t it?) he didn’t let on.

Liam and I took our seats, and I cast him a surreptitious glance as I pulled out my notes. As if changing the view on a video game, I saw him now from an entirely new perspective. His short, blond hair contrasted with his grey eyes, his features straight and even. He was tall and muscular.

Likely all that swordplay.

Today he had traded his usual long coat for jeans and a white T-shirt with an unbuttoned blue plaid shirt over top. Over all of this he wore a short leather jacket.

Handsome, certainly.

I glanced around the class. One girl, a couple of rows over, was staring blatantly at Liam. He squirmed in his seat, his expression that of a schoolboy called on for an answer he didn’t

know as he steadfastly ignored her. Liam glanced at the girl then, only to quickly turn away from her gaze with a displeased frown.

We sat in silence, waiting for the instructor to arrive. My mind flashed back to Liam leaning against the wall, injured or tired—it had been hard to tell which. I studied him for a moment.

“So . . . ,” I began, “how are you today? After last night, I mean.”

Liam bolted upright in his seat, his eyes darting to mine. He didn’t answer for a moment. He turned away.

“Um, fine—I’m good,” he finally replied. He cast me a quick glance. His brow furrowed as his gaze returned to the front of the class.

“Thank you for your help, by the way,” I said. “I would have been in quite a mess if you hadn’t come along.”

Liam didn’t look at me—he only winced a little then took a deep breath and looked down.

“You’re welcome,” he said quietly. “Glad I could help,” he added with a frown.

“So how long have you been working with Ethan?” I asked.

“Not long. A few months maybe,” Liam answered, his tone cautious.

“He mentioned you asked for his help. Have you always worked with them—cians I mean?”

“No.”

“So what did you do before?” I asked.

Liam turned to me, an indecipherable expression on his face. His slate grey eyes brought to mind the windows of a haunted house that showed the darkness within and warned passersby to move on quickly.

“Lecture’s starting,” Liam said, turning to the front of the class and effectively halting the conversation. I glanced over, surprised to see the instructor preparing to start the lecture.

Where did he come from?

I hurried to find my pen. Liam sat back in his seat. He scanned the room every so often while I took notes. I couldn’t concentrate in this class either, but this time it was the abandoned look in Liam’s eyes that circled in my mind, distracting me.

The class eventually ended, and I tossed my things into my backpack. I stood up and reached for it, but Liam already had it slung over his shoulder. We walked out of class, passing by the gaggle of girls and sending them into another spasm of giggles. Liam heaved a sigh and quickened his pace until we were outside the building.

I stepped off to the side of the path and turned to Liam. “What’s next?”

“It’s your lunch break. I suggest you eat your lunch,” he said flatly.

“So I just keep doing my days while these things are after me?” I asked, my brows drawing together.

“Pretty much. Only you need to do them carefully. Conspicuous changes would make the chaeli more cautious and all that much more difficult to catch. We don’t want them to be careful. We want them to get careless and easy to catch.” Liam scanned the Bowl methodically as he continued. “I’m hoping they’ll eventually give up. They don’t usually like to go up against the cians.” He shook his head, his brow creasing. “But something’s different this time. I don’t like it.” He paused a moment as a student strayed within earshot then continued. “Ethan’s involvement seems to have made them more determined than ever to get at you. We can’t figure out why. So, for now, our work is easier if they come to us. If we start having to chase them we could be running into any sort of trap or might find ourselves leaving you unprotected.”

I thought about that for a moment, feeling only slightly better than a piece of cheese in a

mousetrap. At least this piece of cheese had some protection.

“Well, in that case,” I said, shaking my head at the surreal nature of the situation, “let’s have lunch.” I walked over to a sunny patch of grass and sat down. Liam set my pack down beside me. He stood, hands on hips, scanning the area.

“You know,” I started in my best *just-a-word-of-advice* voice as I pulled my sandwich out of my pack, “it’s sort of conspicuous if you stand there watching me. Maybe you should sit down.”

Sandwich condition: mangled but still edible.

Liam looked down at me then nodded once. “Let me know if you see anything unusual.”

“Sure.”

Liam gracefully arranged himself on the ground in front of me. Anyone watching Liam as he leaned back on his hands, long legs stretched out in front of him with ankles crossed, would have thought him casually at ease. The way he scanned around with eyes shadowed by wariness said otherwise. I asked him if he wanted to share some of my lunch. He studied me for a moment before he silently shook his head and turned to watch a couple of students passing by.

“Is it that dangerous?” I asked quietly, not certain I wanted to know the answer. Liam didn’t answer right away. He measured me for a moment with cool eyes the shade of summer clouds.

“Yes, it is,” he said.

I frowned, my thoughts twisting in and out of images of Ethan, Theo, and Liam—and creatures in the night.

“Those ...,” I paused, wondering how to classify the beings I had seen, “... *creatures*,” I decided, “can they hurt you if you get in the way?”

“Are you asking if they can kill us?” Liam asked, studying me, his brows raised a little. I nodded and fought down a bite of ham sandwich. It fought back. Liam’s head tilted as he watched me. “Yes,” he said, “they can kill us.”

“Then why are the three of you helping me? You don’t even know me. Why are you all putting yourselves in danger because of me?”

Liam scanned the Bowl. It was a moment before he answered.

“We all have our reasons. Besides,” he said, turning to me with an arched brow, “what would you have us do? Leave you to face those things on your own? You wouldn’t stand a chance against them. As it is, the three of us can barely keep things contained. If we weren’t around it would only be a matter of time ... and not much of it.” A crease lined his forehead and he shook his head against the thought.

“Don’t get me wrong, I’m very grateful for your help. I’m painfully aware of what would happen to me if you weren’t here. It’s just that, well, I don’t like the risk you’re all facing because of me. It just isn’t fair to you.”

Liam considered me for a moment then, almost casually, looked around again.

“Trust me,” he said, “considering why each of us is here, it’s fair enough. Don’t worry about it. We know what we’re doing. We can take care of ourselves.”

“Seriously? They can kill you,” I reminded him.

“Yeah, sure they *can*, but they’d have to *catch* us first,” Liam said, his mouth turning up into a grin as he turned back to me. I gave him a deadpan look. He sobered. “It’s not that bad. They don’t have the skills or strengths we have and they can’t shift as well as we can. It’s not us you need to worry about. You’re the one in danger here.”

“You said you could barely keep them contained,” I returned. “Besides, Ethan and Theo have to change frequencies to be here. That’s dangerous too. My safety aside, I won’t be

responsible for people dying. They need to go home.”

“Dangerous or not, I can assure you, Ethan won’t be leaving any time soon,” Liam said with a wry laugh. “Sure, this frequency does constitute more of a risk for him, but this isn’t the first time he’s been here. He’ll manage all right. And Theo is never here for long—Ethan sees to that. Besides, if it makes you feel better, I’m keeping an eye on them.” It did—a little.

“Ethan said it isn’t dangerous for you to be here. Why is that?”

Liam’s eyes snapped to mine and I saw surprise—or maybe fear—in them just before they turned the cold colour of a December sky with a threatening winter storm.

“He didn’t tell you?” he asked cautiously, his eyes narrowing.

I shook my head.

“No, he said I should ask you about it.” Liam sighed and surveyed the Bowl for several moments. I said nothing, waiting.

“I’m not sure I deserve that much consideration,” Liam mused to himself. He turned to me then “He’s right. It’s not dangerous for me to be in this time—I’m human.”

“You’re *human*?!?” Surprise made my voice a whole lot louder than it should have been given the conversation. Liam and I reflexively looked around to see if anyone had heard me. One boy walking nearby glanced at me briefly but simply turned away and kept walking. No one else appeared to have noticed us. I lowered my voice to a whisper and turned back to Liam.

“You’re human?!?”

“Yeah—or at least some close approximation of it,” Liam replied in a resigned tone. One corner of his mouth turned up, but I wouldn’t exactly have called it a smile.

“But you’re so good at shifting. I assumed you were a cian.”

“Shifting just takes practice—and I’m not a cian,” he said shaking his head. “I can’t leave you thinking that. I’m—” he stopped abruptly, glancing at me before turning away with a heavy sigh. He frowned and began to say something else, but clamped his mouth shut and shook his head. He replaced his frown with an reasonable facsimile of a smile before looking back up at me and continuing. “Like I said: it just takes practice.”

“So humans can do those things too?”

“Yeah, some,” Liam answered, nodding.

“Will you teach me?” I blurted. Liam gave me a sideways glance through narrowed eyes. I looked down. “I mean ... , I need to be able to control it, right? I need to be able to do what you do.” I chanced a look at him then. Liam’s brow furrowed. I could see the debate running through his head as he studied me for a time.

“You do need to learn control, but trust me, you don’t want to be any more involved than you already are,” he said, his words steeped in a melancholy that reflected in his deepening grey eyes. The tenor of his voice left my chest feeling stiff and made breathing difficult.

“Why not?” I only just managed to choke out.

“You don’t want to live this life: alone, living outside of your own time—like you climbed onto the shore of a river and watched while everything and everyone was washed downstream. It’s not living; it’s ... *existing*.” He shook his head emphatically saying, “No, you don’t want to live like this.”

“What do you mean ‘living outside of your time’?”

“If you’re constantly shifted into a higher frame,” Liam began, “you live out of sync with your time. You exist outside of human life, living well beyond your years—everyone you knew” He only shook his head and turned away.

“How old are you then?” The question was out of my mouth before I could think about

whether or not I should have asked it.

“I am very old,” Liam said, enunciating every word as a humourless smile turned up one corner of his mouth. “I don’t age like other humans do. I’m guessing that’s because I mostly live on the fringes of this time, barely interacting with it. But ... now ... ,” he hesitated, redirecting his gaze.

“Now?” I prompted.

Liam turned back to me and I saw what I could only describe as fear in his eyes.

“Now I’m worried all that time will suddenly catch up to me.”

“So why do you do it? You must be able to live like a human.”

“I did at first. I didn’t even realize I was shifting at the beginning—sort of like you.” He stopped and considered me for a moment. He drew a steadying breath. “But then,” he hesitated, “... too much happened. Too many people died.” He winced, turning his face away.

In the brief moment before he turned away, I saw desolation reflected in Liam’s stormy eyes—the kind of resigned reluctance that exists in someone for whom pain has become a constant companion. What I saw in Liam’s eyes seared into my stomach and twisted there as I sat watching him. I wanted to reach out to him—take his hand or something—try to ease his pain, but I didn’t dare. He seemed too far away and I knew I wouldn’t be able to reach him if I tried. In truth, I was also afraid: afraid I wouldn’t be able to help him; afraid I would be pulled down with him into his misery. After a moment he composed himself, but kept looking down, seemingly lost in some other time and place as he spoke.

“There came a point,” Liam said, “when I felt I couldn’t do it anymore. I opted out.” He kept his eyes turned away from me as he continued. “I keep to myself now—mostly. I ... *subsist*. You’re the first human I’ve spoken to in a very long time.”

I studied him for a moment and all I could see was a drowning man who had reconciled himself to the fact that he was beyond reach of shore.

“What about the cian frequency?” I asked. “Couldn’t you live there?” When Liam finally looked at me again I was only able to hold his gaze for a second before guilt made me turn away, hoping he wouldn’t guess what I was thinking—that maybe it didn’t have to be that way for him—or for me. Maybe he didn’t have to be alone. If he could survive in the cian frequency then just maybe I could too, and if that were possible, maybe I wouldn’t be just a *job* for them ... and if that were the case I shook my head, but the final thought remained stubbornly lodged in place.

“I might fit in better there—*maybe*. But from what I know,” Liam began, “any human going to their frequency dies pretty quickly—more quickly than a cian living in our frequency. No, that wouldn’t be an option.”

“So there’s no way a human can survive there?”

Liam shook his head. “As far as I know, everyone dies.” He watched me steadily. My hopes began to go down in the same icy waters as the drowning man that existed just behind Liam’s cool grey eyes.

“With that said,” Liam continued causing me to refocus my attention, “I do think you need to learn control. You need to learn how to stay in your own time so you can avoid the very situation I now find myself in.”

Learn to stay here? Now why would I want that?

However, if I knew how to avoid it, wouldn’t I also know how to do it intentionally? I looked up at Liam. “Will you teach me that much then?” I asked.

“Maybe. I suppose it would be the thing to do—for your sake—now that you know about

them anyway. First I need to see what Ethan's father has to say about this. You're really not supposed to know about cians, let alone be learning how to shift." He paused then continued. "We'll have to see how he wants us to handle this, and I'll have to follow the plan. Right now you'd better hurry with your lunch. We have to be in class in fifteen minutes." I had completely forgotten my lunch. I stuffed a large bite of sandwich into my mouth, pleasantly surprised I was able to keep it down.

Liam sat patiently with me through my next class, but I could tell he was rather grateful when class ended and the students began to file out of the room. I grabbed my things and turned to pull on my backpack, but once again Liam was already holding it. We walked silently together out of the building and out into the Bowl. I immediately spotted Ethan and Theo standing a short way off.

He's back!

A sudden thrill swept through me—a thrill and acute relief. Honestly, I couldn't have told you whether my heart was racing a mile a minute, or if it had actually stopped beating all together. I smiled a little too widely at him and he responded with a polite smile. I could hear my heart pounding.

Liam grasped my elbow then as we began to make our way to where Ethan and Theo stood. I was suddenly swept away in a tsunami of instantly-remembered sights and sounds in a monster case of déjà vu. I "remembered" watching Ethan with Liam holding my elbow, but I knew we were still in that moment. I stopped, turning toward Liam, feeling dizzy and a little confused.

Liam leaned close and said quietly, "You *really* have to stop doing that. This isn't the time or the place."

My head swam, and I could only stand looking up at Liam. He released my arm then and the déjà vu cleared, but my dizziness didn't. Ethan was suddenly beside me, a slight frown on his face. I tried to make my muddled brain function normally again as I looked questioningly at Ethan.

"Can I see you?" I whispered swaying unsteadily on my feet.

"Yes," he said, watching me closely. Ethan frowned down at me, placing a steadying hand on my shoulder. I felt warmth wrap itself around my shoulders and work its way up into my neck, calming the swimming sensation in my head. The swaying stopped and my head began to clear.

Wait a minute!

Several pieces of the puzzle spun and connected, dropping into place.

"What did you do just now?" I asked sharply, looking up at Liam. "I keep having déjà vu whenever you're around. Are you doing that?"

Liam nodded.

"I was shifting down while I was next to you, trying to keep you from shifting up too high. What you call 'déjà vu' happens when you get caught in the wave of someone else's shift. You already moved through that fraction of a second in time, but the simultaneous shift back makes you move through it a second time."

I stood, trying to wrap my head around that. Liam was speaking to Ethan before I had made much progress.

"Did you speak with your father?" Liam asked.

"Yes," Ethan answered, his expression becoming pained as worry darkened his eyes. "He's still at the house. I explained the situation to him. He's leaving for home shortly, but would like

to speak with you before he goes.” I saw Liam nod, but he made no move to leave.

“What did your father say?” I asked tentatively.

“He’s justifiably concerned about how involved you are. He agrees, however, the situation appears unprecedented and we seemingly have no choice but to allow things to continue with your participation. Simply put, none of us have many options here. Evidently, you were shifting to some extent before Liam and I even arrived. That’s obviously what caught the chaeli’s attention in the first place.” Ethan, Theo, and Liam exchanged glances at the mention of the chaeli. “Our presence seems to have amplified what you were already doing. It’s possible you would have reached this point on your own even if we hadn’t become involved—we may have only hastened the process.”

“That would make sense,” Liam interjected. “I was around her age when I realized I was shifting. It just sort of snuck up on me. I didn’t know I was doing it for some time.”

“That’s reasonable, but whatever the explanation, my father has asked me to deal with the situation as best I can. I likely have as much experience with humans as any cian.” He turned to Liam again. “We discussed the need to put an end to the situation before I’m here too long. My father is asking to speak with you—to see if you can shed any light on why the chaeli are so intent on getting to Elly.”

Liam hesitated, studying Ethan with a look you might see on a man forced to walk into a lion’s den.

“He’s waiting at the house. Will you speak with him?” Ethan asked, watching Liam closely.

Liam turned away, nodding.

“Yeah. Sure. I’ll go talk to him,” Liam said with a rough quietness.

“Thank you,” Ethan said sincerely. Liam only nodded again. Ethan turned to look at me then. “As far as Jessica is concerned, my father has left that up to your discretion. He is concerned, however, about the dangers of involving her and advises caution.” He paused then, tilting his head to catch my eye. “Are you all right?” he asked.

I wasn’t certain what he saw that made him ask the question. My mind was still listening to the echo of his words: “before I’m here too long” and “put an end to this” as the words beat out a harsh rhythm in my head. I only nodded up at him.

“I’m fine. Jess—yeah—I’ll figure out what to tell her,” I said. I had no idea what I would tell her. Ethan’s brow creased but Liam was saying something and Ethan turned his attention to him.

“... I’ll go meet with your father,” I heard Liam say. “Have you got this covered?”

Ethan nodded, casting me another glance.

“I’ll be back as soon as I can,” Liam said.

Ethan gave me one last look then forced his attention back to Liam.

“Could I speak with you a moment before you go?” Ethan asked. Liam nodded, his eyes narrowing. “Would you excuse us?” Ethan directed the question to me, studying me cautiously.

“Sure. I’ll go get my bike.”

“I’ll catch up to you,” Ethan reassured me. I watched as Ethan, Theo, and Liam walked a short distance away, talking quietly.

Well that just can’t be good.

I hesitated, an unsettled feeling pulling at my stomach. After a second or two, I turned and started down the path toward my bike. I glanced over my shoulder, seeing the three of them watching me as I walked away. I turned back around, the unsettled feeling twisting into something that made it difficult to breathe.

I ought to have paid more attention to where I was going, but I didn't and collided square on with someone crossing my path. I looked up and instantly recognized the shock of tight copper curls.

"Sean," I said in surprise. "I'm so sorry. I wasn't watching where I was going."

Sean only grinned his usual congenial grin.

"No worries—nothing damaged," he chuckled. "Actually, it's kinda nice to 'bump into you' like this." He laughed at his joke. I laughed too, but I couldn't honestly say it was his joke I was laughing at. "Where are you headed?" Sean asked easily. I could see an eager glint in his eyes.

"Umm ... , I'm done for the day. Just getting my bike and heading home."

"Oh," Sean said sounding pleasantly surprised. "I have a break before my next class. So ... ," he hesitated a moment. "... do you think you might want to grab a coffee?"

I could only stare at him, my brain completely devoid of any appropriate response. The only thought that came to mind was: *naturally not*, but I couldn't very well say that, could I? What finally came out of my mouth was something more like, "Oh—um, thank you for the offer, but Ethan was meeting me at my bike. There's something we need to do." I gestured in Ethan's direction, turning to look back at him.

Ethan, Theo, and Liam still stood a short way off. At that moment, Ethan's eyes flickered to mine and held my gaze a moment longer than necessary before he turned back to his conversation with Liam. Sean started talking then and I turned back to him, but my thoughts remained on Ethan's cold expression.

"Oh, yeah, okay," Sean was saying. "Well, I shouldn't keep you then." He gave me a half-hearted smile and continued on his way. Guilt pricked at my conscience like I had just kicked a puppy, but I kept my mouth shut. I only stood, watching as Sean walked away. Sometimes the kinder thing to do is to do nothing at all. After a moment or two I sighed and continued on toward my bike.

I heard footsteps coming up behind me then, and not wanting to risk another collision, I looked back to see Ethan walking up the path at a quick pace. He stopped in front of me and studied my face for a moment.

"Elly," he said with a slight frown, "I overheard your conversation"

"Wait," I interrupted. "You heard that from where you were?"

"Yes," Ethan nodded. "If we shift up we can hear things at a fair distance."

Huh.

"Where are Liam and Theo?" I asked, glancing around. Ethan frowned in frustration.

"Liam has gone to speak with my father and Theo went to scout out your apartment," he answered quickly. Then: "Elly, you're free to go for coffee with Sean if you'd like. I can keep you safe while keeping my distance."

Where did that come from?

I stood staring at Ethan, confused, as I tried unsuccessfully to decode his words. I ran through them a second time and even then I couldn't attach any meaning to them.

"What are you talking about?" I finally had to ask, shaking my head. "We have to go talk to Jess. Besides, I don't *want* to go for coffee with Sean."

Ethan placed his hands on his hips as he studied the ground, a pained cast to his features. He sighed heavily and hesitated before he responded. He finally looked up.

"It's just that ... ," he paused, and for the first time since I had met him, he appeared utterly ... *human*. He turned away and took a breath before continuing. "Well, I don't want to interfere

with your life. He may not ask again. And later ... when I've gone home ... I don't" He stopped, then fixed a determined expression on his face and continued. "It's just that you'll need to return to a normal life and I don't want you to regret the decisions you make now." Ethan stumbled through his reasoning, his eyes darkening as he spoke.

I stood frozen to the spot, staring at his face. Even though he had spoken quietly, gently even, his words sounded harsh.

Return to a normal life.

The words echoed endlessly in my brain, growing louder with each run. My throat tightened and I tried to swallow. He expected me to go back to a *normal* life? I didn't even know what that was anymore—as if I ever had. Even if that were possible, the idea of returning to a normal life *without Ethan* made tears prick at my eyes. It felt so very *wrong*.

I looked away, inadvertently turning to see Sean's retreating figure. I stood, staring at him. Mostly I was trying not to blink—trying to contain the tears threatening to spill over. Then a terrible thought broke my concentration: maybe someone was waiting for Ethan in his time. The idea stabbed at my chest and I exhaled sharply.

"It's not too late," Ethan said then, his voice flat. I turned back to him to find him watching Sean.

"Yes," I replied, unable to control the hard edge to my voice. "Actually it *is*." Ethan's eyes to snapped to mine and I had to look away.

I turned and stalked off, heading for my bike and taking a swipe at the traitorous tear that had broken free. I walked quickly, feeling that maybe if I walked fast enough, I could leave this entire mess behind me.

Constrained by the need to appear human, it actually took Ethan a couple of steps to catch up to me. "Elly," he called after me, his tone one of regret. Hurrying his steps he came around to stand in front of me again, stopping me in my tracks. I reluctantly looked up at him.

"Please don't be angry," Ethan said. "I'm sorry. It wasn't my intent to upset you." His brow was furrowed and his eyes were even darker than they had been a moment ago.

I took a deep breath, trying to think rationally—it was difficult. Of course Ethan had every right to have his own life and to return to it when he chose. But there was a problem with that: the voice in my head kept insisting it was wrong to say the things he had said—that it would be wrong of him to leave. My little voice whispered words like "forever" to me—but Ethan couldn't hear my little voice, could he? I sighed.

"I'm fine," I replied unconvincingly. I squared my shoulders and tried again. "I get it: this whole thing is an assignment and you have a life to get back to. But, honestly, returning to a 'normal' life isn't going to happen for me."

Oh, and, by the way, this assignment is forever.

I shook my head against that thought and tried to focus. Ethan's expression was like that of a soldier surveying the wreckage in the wake of a battle as he studied me for several long moments. I didn't dare look away. I didn't even blink. He frowned then and closed his eyes as he raked his fingers through his hair. He sighed and when he looked at me again, his expression was unreadable—almost detached.

"I'm sorry," he finally responded. "That wasn't supposed to happen—you weren't supposed to know about any of this."

"I know. You did your best. It's not your fault that I'm way more involved than I ought to be."

“Yes, actually it *is*,” Ethan echoed, his eyes the colour of a cold lake following a storm. He turned away then, a frown capturing one corner of his mouth. He took a breath, straightened his features and started off in the direction of my bike. “All right. Let’s go talk to Jessica,” he said flatly.

I hurried to catch up.

Chapter 9: Jess

When we got to my bike, I could only stare at it as though it were a foreign object. Had I only left it here yesterday?

Really?

Somehow it felt as though there had been a whole lot more *day* in the past twenty-four hours—an entire lifetime in fact. It was at that moment I realized it had taken a mere twenty-four hours (give or take) for my entire life to change.

And I never even saw it coming.

As I watched Ethan kneel down to unlock my bike, my thoughts returned to the problem of explaining things to Jess. How on earth was I going to tell her how very different things were now? *Should* I tell her? Ethan stood then and paused, casting me a speculative look.

“You’re too quiet. What are you thinking about?” he asked with a hint of caution in his voice.

“Nothing,” I said, brushing it off. “I was just lost in thought—mostly thinking about Jess. I really don’t know what to tell her.”

“Oh, I see,” he said with equal measures of relief and concern. “Let’s take your bike to my car. I’ll give you a ride home and we can discuss it on the way.” He pulled my bike out of the rack and easily hoisted it onto his shoulder, his bicep barely straining as he balanced the bike. He turned, and we set off for his car.

“I’m sure your behaviour recently is difficult for Jessica to understand,” Ethan said as we walked. “It must seem very odd to her, not knowing the situation.”

“She’s always looked out for me,” I explained. “Ever since we were kids on the playground. I sort of stood out from the crowd when I was young.” Ethan turned to me then, one eyebrow arched. “Okay. I know. I *still* stand out from the crowd. My point is, she’s always watched out for me—both Jess and my parents have—they still do. They don’t understand my weirdness, but at least they accept it. They know other people aren’t as tolerant of my odd skills. I’ve never really had a . . . ,” I paused and glanced uncertainly at Ethan. His eyes met mine and I turned away. “. . . *friend* before. My parents are suspicious of you because of that. Jess doesn’t know you and doesn’t trust you and there’s no way she would understand what’s going on. Honestly, I’m the one in the middle of all this and I don’t understand it.” I shook my head.

“Is there some way we can reassure her without having her know everything? I’m concerned that if Jessica finds out more about why you do the things you do she may be alarmed. A frightened human is unpredictable at best and dangerous at worst.”

“I just can’t see Jess going off the deep end,” I said shaking my head. “She’s very responsible and levelheaded. Overbearing, definitely, but dangerous? I just can’t picture that. She wouldn’t do anything to hurt me.”

“No, but what might she do in the name of *protecting* you?” Ethan countered. My eyes met his for a moment and I frowned. Ethan continued. “In our experience, we’ve found the people who cause the most harm are the ones who are most concerned. They act out of a misguided

attempt to protect the person they love. You're reading the Cupid and Psyche myth in English class. Look at what Orual did to Psyche, thinking she was protecting her—it's the same idea. I know the story is a myth, but it conveys a truth about human nature—that's why the story exists. Can you be certain of Jessica's reaction if you tell her everything?"

I thought about that for a moment. I wanted to say yes, but what if Jess thought she could protect me better by keeping me away from Ethan? What if she couldn't make this fantastic leap in logic—more a leap of faith, really? What would Jess' idea of *protection* be?

"She would never do anything to harm me," I began cautiously, "but I really don't know what she might do if she felt you were a threat."

"That's exactly my point."

I stopped for a moment, reworking the fit of the puzzle pieces in my head. Ethan stopped too, watching me, his brows drawing together. Suddenly the pieces of the puzzle fell into place.

Ah ... yes, that's it.

I took a deep breath, smiling and nodding my head as my eyes met Ethan's questioning gaze.

"I just figured it out. I think I know what to do." Ethan stood silently watching me, one eyebrow raised expectantly. "Here's my thing: she may not trust you, but she *does* trust me. She's used to my freakishness. I'll just explain things in terms of what she understands." Ethan frowned at me, and stood unmoving. "Trust me," I said, ignoring Ethan's dubious expression. I turned and started walking toward the car.

I sat silently staring out the window as we drove, watching the people and traffic move past in an unending and sometimes blurred-together stream. I saw a balding guy in the next car over singing along with a song on the radio; I saw a harried-looking mother pushing a child in a stroller down the sidewalk; and I saw a stern man in a business suit scurry past, talking on his cell phone. There were people sitting in street-side cafes drinking coffee and laughing and watching people like me pass by. There were all of those people living ordinary lives, knowing nothing of the people, places, and events that lay just beyond their world.

Ethan parked the car in front of my apartment building, and I pulled myself out of my reverie. Shutting off the engine, Ethan turned in his seat to study me, resting one arm along the top of the steering wheel and letting his hand hang down as though it were heavy. He locked his cobalt eyes on me, and in a somewhat insistent tone, asked, "Are you going to tell me what your plan is?"

I stopped watching his hand and looked up at his face. My thoughts stopped there. I knew he was waiting for me to answer and I understood the question, but all I could do was sit and stare at him. I thought of all the times he must have been nearby, watching me, without me ever knowing. The idea reproached me in an odd way as though I had accidentally thrown away a pair of jeans I had never worn.

I could smell his scent close around me, lingering on the warm air in the car, and if I concentrated just a little, I could hear his heart beating. Ethan sat watching me expectantly, but my thoughts continued to stray. Maybe it was a good thing humans didn't ordinarily notice things like heartbeats.

I sat, hypnotized by Ethan's eyes. I saw some emotion reflected there that I couldn't name—an emotion seeming to me both soft and harsh at the same time. In the brief time we sat looking at one another, I felt every nerve in my body start to tingle. I heard his breathing deepen and my heart picked up speed. Then I watched, transfixed, as Ethan's eyes turn from an ocean blue to the deep jade of summer leaves in mid-season.

Amazing.

This was a colour I hadn't seen in his eyes before—and *I liked it*—in a terrifying sort of way. The intensity of Ethan's gaze served a warning, but the warmth of it proved insistently reassuring. The way the light played in the jade of his eyes drew me in like a mouse to a baited trap.

"Your eyes change colour sometimes. Why is that?" I heard myself say, the words out of my mouth before I even knew I was talking. I didn't really care—I only watched his eyes as they darkened to a sea green.

Ethan winced and closed his eyes. He turned away, his hand clenching and falling from its perch on the steering wheel. He pressed himself back into his seat, and turned his face to the side window. I could hear the uneven beating of his heart and his shallow breathing.

I was about to ask what was wrong when he turned to face forward again and drew in a ragged breath. He didn't look at me. He sat staring out the windshield for a long moment before he spoke in a tightly controlled tone. "Everyone's eyes change colour. It's simply imperceptible to *normal* people. Elly, try to focus before you shift any more." He still wasn't looking at me.

I'm shifting again?

I tried to get my bearings. He had been talking about something else. No, he'd asked me a question.

"I'm sorry," I finally confessed, "what did you ask before?"

He sighed heavily.

"I asked if you were going to tell me what you are planning to do," he replied with a hint of frustration in his tone.

"Oh, right. I don't really have it planned out. I just have an idea of how this should go. Some things will depend on Jess' reaction. I think it'll be easier if you just play along. I'll run interference so you shouldn't have to answer any questions you can't handle."

"You want me to come in with you?" he asked skeptically. "Isn't that the opposite of providing as little information as possible?"

"Yes I do and no it isn't—well, maybe. It depends how this goes. This will work better if you're with me. A united front and all that."

"Just exactly what are you going to tell her?" he pressed, his tone a mix of worry and suspicion.

"I'm not exactly certain of the wording. I'm going to wing it." That earned me a disapproving frown. I thought I'd better give him a little more than that before he got upset.

"I'm going to explain things within the context of what she already knows about me," I said.

"The focus will be on the things she knows I do already—*my* freakishness, not *yours*."

"Are you certain you know what you're doing?" Ethan asked, casting me a look filled with distrust. "This doesn't seem very well thought out."

"A little trust please," I said indignantly. "You worry too much. Besides, you may have been watching me for a while, but there are a couple of things you obviously don't know about me." I reached to open the door only to find Ethan outside of the car and already opening it for me. I followed him to the trunk to retrieve my bike and nearly jumped out of my skin when I saw him pull it out: it was folded in *half*!

"I ... but ... what ...," I stammered, pointing to my bike.

"Calm down, Elly," Ethan said as he effortlessly straightened the frame with both hands then lowered my bike to the ground. I gaped at the bike, then at Ethan, my mouth hanging open.

“What did you do?!”

“You didn’t honestly believe your bike fit into the trunk did you?” Ethan asked. “This is the only way it works.”

I inspected the bike closely. No new dents, no new gaps in the paint—not even a scratch or a crinkle—it looked the same as always. Well, no, that wasn’t quite true. He had straightened the dent in the handlebar. Now it looked better than before.

“You *did* straighten the rim after the fall,” I said as another puzzle piece fell into place. I turned to him, waiting for a response.

“Of course. You couldn’t very well ride it like that.”

Well no, certainly not, but ...

I took a deep breath and decided to try this again.

“Okay. Thank you, but my real question is: *how* did you do that?”

“Oh, that. It has to do with imparting energy to the frame,” Ethan answered in an offhand manner. “I heated the frame a little so I could fold it and unfold it. Don’t worry. I didn’t damage it. It only maintains the energy while I’m holding it.”

“What did you heat it with?”

He held up his hands.

“I simply added heat energy,” he replied.

I looked at him and blinked several times.

“And you can do that to anything?” I asked.

“Well, many things anyway.”

Could this get any more weird?

Not likely. I shook my head. We locked up my bike and headed up to the apartment.

Jess wasn’t home. We were greeted instead by the smell of pasta and sauce in the slow cooker. It made my mouth water like a Pavlovian dog. I hung my jacket up then turned to invite Ethan to make himself at home. There was no need. He had already set my backpack on the counter, right where I usually put it at the end of each day, and was seated at the kitchen table, watching me. He had pulled his chair beside the table, his back to the wall. He had done all of this in the time it had taken me to turn back to him, and I hadn’t even heard him move.

I studied him as he leaned casually back in the kitchen chair, sitting amidst the dull browns of the eating area—colours I had always hated. A kitchen should never be a somber brown. The sun never entered the kitchen directly, only stretching in from the balcony doors in the next room, the light getting thinner as it tried to reach the kitchen floor. It never quite made it. Now, looking at Ethan sitting in the dullness of the room, it seemed to me he didn’t belong there in the dark, dull space.

Ethan’s expression was unreadable, his eyes a deep blue-green as they peered through me to another time and place. It occurred to me then: he’s done all of this before—without me knowing anything about it. I had often seen the chair at an angle to the table but didn’t think much about it, assuming Jess had moved it.

He was there the whole time.

Had he sat with us while Jess and I ate supper? I felt cheated somehow now, knowing all of the time we might have spent together and all of the conversations we might have had. I took a sad sort of breath and shook my head, trying to free myself of the regret that threatened.

“Can I get you anything?” I asked.

“No thank you. I’m fine. Don’t mind me.” Then he grinned at me. “Just pretend I’m not here.”

“Yes, that’s worked pretty well in the past,” I retorted, casting him a disparaging glance. But instead of being properly chastised as he ought to have been, he only chuckled quietly. I turned my back to him and proceeded to unpack my bag, pulling out my notes and the remnants of my lunch.

I had just gotten my things sorted when I heard the soft clunk of metal on metal as Jess unlocked the door. I quickly pulled a couple of glasses from the cupboard and a Coke from the fridge. I set the glasses on the table and poured pop into them, leaving Ethan’s glass only half full so it appeared as though he had already finished some of it.

“Try to look human,” I said to him. I slid the half-full glass of Coke in front of him as I sat down across the table with the other glass. Sharing a Coke was a normal thing to do if I brought home a friend, wasn’t it?

Ethan studied the glass for a moment then looked cautiously back up at me. He picked up the glass and brought it to his mouth, pausing a second just before taking a swallow. His brow suddenly creased and his head jerked back as he scowled at the remainder of the Coke. He set the cup on the table, one corner of his mouth turned down. He pushed the glass away. I couldn’t resist a small laugh but had to straighten my face when Ethan frowned at me.

Obviously not a big Coke fan.

“Watch and learn,” I whispered, draining half the contents of my cup in one go. Ethan only rolled his eyes at me. I laughed again.

Jess chose that moment to walk into the kitchen (I thought it was rather good timing on my part). “Hey, Elly, you’re actually home for a change ...,” she began, her tone thick with meaning. She stopped abruptly when she saw Ethan. “Oh. Ummm ... Hi, Ethan. I didn’t realize you were here.”

I breathed a little easier then. Just as I had hoped, Jess would be on her best behaviour in front of Ethan. That should keep her from having a complete meltdown.

“Hello Jessica, it’s good to see you again,” Ethan replied politely.

“Ethan gave me a ride home,” I said, keeping my tone light and trying to act as if I had friends over all the time. “How was your day, Jess?” Jess shot me a questioning look, but I ignored it, taking a sip of Coke instead.

“Fine, I suppose,” Jess answered. “Just the usual stuff. How about *yours*?” Jess asked meaningfully as she began to unpack her bag.

“Actually, it seemed a little long,” I replied. “I haven’t been home since yesterday.” I gave Jess the lead-in she needed. I didn’t want to irritate her any more than she already was by making her chase after the information she wanted. Jess looked at me and then at Ethan, her eyes brimming with unasked questions—questions she was obviously hesitant to ask in front of Ethan.

Perfect.

I took a long drink, giving Jess a moment to think. When she didn’t say anything, I met her gaze. “Jess, I want to explain what happened last night.” I felt, more than saw, Ethan stiffen.

He’s so paranoid.

“Also,” I continued, ignoring the look Ethan was giving me at that moment, “there are some things you should know. Why don’t you sit down?” Jess remained where she stood and folded

her arms across her stomach. She gave me the sort of look a parent gives a child who has just wiped the dog's muddy feet with the company towels.

I'll try that again, shall I?

"Jess," I said, meeting her stern glare, "you asked me to tell you when I knew what was wrong."

Jess nodded.

"And?" she replied warily.

"Well, I know what's wrong." Ethan and Jess exchanged a brief glance—his worried, hers suspicious—just before they both turned a cautious look on me. I gave each of them my most sardonically reassuring smile.

"Okay ...," Jess said in her familiar *this-had-better-be-good* tone. She pulled a chair out from the table and sat between Ethan and me. "What's up?" She cast a surreptitious glance at Ethan. I took a deep breath to steady myself and dove in.

"First, I'm sorry about staying away last night. I know you were worried and it was an odd thing for me to do. But believe me, it was really the only thing I could have done."

"I could have come to get you," Jess countered.

"No, that's just it: I didn't *want* you to do that. Ethan's house was the safest place for me and I didn't want you to be out last night. It wouldn't have been safe—for you."

"I thought you weren't feeling well," she accused. "And what do you mean, 'not safe' for me?"

"I honestly didn't feel well toward the end of the evening, Jess. I was very stressed and extremely tired." True so far. "But there was another reason why I needed to stay. Something happened when I left the library last night." I paused as Ethan shot me a cautionary glance. I met his gaze directly. He said nothing. He dropped his gaze to the table for a moment before lifting it back up to Jess.

"What happened?" Jess asked, looking between Ethan and me. Her eyebrows drew together as she scrutinized my face.

"When I went to get my bike, I saw two ... men in the Bowl. They started coming toward me and I was trying to figure out what to do when Ethan showed up along with his brother and Liam." Jess turned to Ethan then back to me. I continued. "The men didn't appear friendly, Jess." Jess stared at me, turning a shade paler than her normal vampire-like tone. I let that sink in for a moment before I sprang the next bit of information on her.

One step at a time.

"That's exactly why I told you not to stay late," Jess shot at me tersely. She turned back to Ethan. "Thank you for helping Elly—*again*."

"You're welcome," Ethan said easily, bowing his head to Jess.

"That's just it, Jess. Ethan keeps coming to my rescue. That's sort of my point. Last night wasn't the first time those men have come around." Not the exact *same* creatures of course but close enough.

No need for gory details.

"It wasn't the first time that Ethan has saved me from whatever it is they are trying to do," I clarified. Jess sat up straighter in her chair.

"What do you mean, 'what they're trying to do'?" she demanded. "Are you telling me someone is *after* you? That's crazy. Why would anyone be after you?"

“We’re not exactly certain what they want. Ethan thinks it may have something to do with the odd things I do sometimes.”

Jess’ brow furrowed and her tone turned wary.

“Why would they care about that?” Jess asked, turning to Ethan. He opened his mouth to say something, but I cut him off.

“We don’t know,” I put in, “but we’re trying to figure it out. In the meantime, Ethan and Liam have said they would hang around to keep an eye on things and help me if I need it.”

“No—wait,” Jess said, shaking her head quickly. “These men are after you? We need to go to the police then.”

“No, Jess. We can’t do that.”

“Why not?” Jess raised her eyebrows at me. “Of course you go to the police if menacing people are following you.”

“And tell them what Jess? ‘I saw two guys in the Bowl and I was a little scared until my friends came and took me home’? Or maybe: ‘yeah, I fell off my bike and maybe there was someone in the bushes when I fell’? There’s nothing to tell them.” Jess only studied me silently. “Besides,” I continued, “if those guys are following me because of the weird things I do, do you really want to try to explain *that* to the police? They’ll throw both of us into an insane asylum.”

Certainly possible given the situation.

Jess frowned and sighed heavily as she studied the tabletop. I hurried on. “Ethan, Liam, and Theo said they would stick around if I’m okay with that until we figure out what’s going on. They should be able to handle things if I let them.” Ethan threw me a sharp glance—which I ignored. I had said the thing about “letting them” help me intentionally. It gave Jess the impression I was in control of things. Besides, I wasn’t entirely certain I was going to let Ethan stay, and I didn’t want to lie any more than I had to.

“Oh really?” Jess asked, turning a skeptical look on Ethan. “And you’re able to *handle this*?” she challenged.

Ethan turned his attention to Jess, reassembling his expression. He opened his mouth to say something, but I cut him off—again.

“Believe me Jess, they can handle this. They’ve already helped me a couple of times.” I could see Jess doing a mental tally all of the times Ethan had rescued me as she studied him.

“I can assure you,” Ethan said, shooting me a silencing glance, “Elly will be well protected. We’ll stay close and keep an eye on things.”

I’m sure they will.

“No offense,” Jess said with a hint of condescension in her tone and a frown on her face, “but this is *not* the way to handle something like this. This plan is insane.” She looked between the two of us with one brow raised.

Time to play my ace.

“Jess,” I said, leaning toward her and resting my elbows on the table, “this is the right thing to do. Last night at Ethan’s house was the first time I’ve slept in a week.”

Jess’ eyes snapped over to meet mine and she sobered. She glanced at Ethan then back at me, her eyes narrowing.

I continued. “Ethan and Liam are the ones I need to help me. Besides, like I said, we’ve got nothing to take to the police.”

“I suppose this is another one of those things you just *know*?” Jess asked sarcastically.

“Pretty much, yeah.” I locked gazes with her pale blue eyes. She blinked first. She sighed heavily then looked down at the tabletop for several long moments.

“Fine,” she said in a frustrated tone. She looked up at me, frowning. “We’ll do it your way—*for now*. But just because I *understand* what you can do doesn’t mean I *like* it. If things get out of hand we’re going to the police.”

“Sure,” I said agreeably.

Game, set, and match.

Ethan looked over at me, a puzzled expression on his face just before he glanced back at Jess. I ignored that. I had to put one more piece in place before this would work.

“Jess, you need to be careful too,” I added. “We don’t know what these guys want. We don’t know whether or not this involves you too.”

“I’ll keep my head up,” Jess said, nodding thoughtfully.

“Thanks Jess.” At least she would be watching for danger now—not that she could actually see it coming of course . . .

“Not so fast,” Jess called out just as I was about to stand up. “Are you *sure* you can handle this?” she asked, studying Ethan with a measuring expression fixed on her face.

Uh oh, my train is about to derail.

“I’m absolutely certain,” Ethan said assuredly. Ethan held Jess’ gaze. He spoke quietly saying, “I’m sorry you’re not comfortable with our plan, Jessica, but it honestly is our only option right now.”

“You’re right,” Jess answered, “I don’t like the plan, but I know Elly well enough to trust her . . . *instincts*.” Jess gave Ethan a meaningful look. Ethan nodded as he continued to watch Jess.

“She certainly does have unusual talents.” He leaned forward, placing the tips of his fingers on the back of her hand as it rested on the table. Jess appeared to startle then sort of melted into her seat. She watched Ethan with vaguely unfocused eyes, like she was a snake staring down a snake charmer. Ethan continued. “But the thing is, Jessica: Elly isn’t the only one with unusual talents.” Ethan held Jess’ vacant stare for a moment longer before pulling his hand away and leaning back in his chair. He tilted his head and watched Jess carefully as her eyes refocused.

Jess suddenly drew a deep breath and snatched her hand away. She stared at Ethan like he was a leopard about to pounce.

“What kind of freak are you?” Jess asked quietly, meeting Ethan’s gaze warily, her brow creasing.

“The kind you want on your side,” he said quietly and soberly.

Jess’ eyebrows rose and her eyes widened as surprise momentarily registered on her face. Then one corner of her mouth turned up in a shrewd smile.

“Yeah,” Jess said, nodding. “This might work.”

What?!

Everything I had planned and said so carefully and *this* was what she found reassuring?! It occurred to me then that Jess and Ethan were going to get along “like a house on fire”. Maybe I should have led with Ethan’s odd skills. I could have saved us all a lot of time. Maybe Jess would feel even better if I told her Ethan could disappear from human time altogether. Better yet, I could tell her he had a sword. I huffed lightly and frowned to myself.

“I’m glad we had a chance to talk, Jessica,” Ethan said as he rose from the table. “But if you

ladies will excuse me, I have a few things to take care of. Elly, may I have a word with you outside please?"

I didn't like the way his mouth was set. He seemed calm, but his eyes were too dark.

"I'll walk you out," I replied resignedly. We turned and left the apartment together.

I cast Ethan a sideways glance as we walked, noting his eyes had darkened to a deep, midnight blue. He didn't look at me.

Definitely not happy.

Outside, Ethan scanned the surrounding area. He leaned down to speak quietly in my ear. "Is there anything out here I'm not seeing?"

I looked around. There was only a couple walking down the sidewalk holding hands and they certainly didn't appear dangerous.

"I don't think so," I replied. "You can see them right?" I asked, giving a surreptitious nod toward the couple.

Ethan glanced at them, then gave me a quizzical look.

"Yes, I can." He studied me for a second then shook his head and ushered me forward.

"This conversation might best be held in the car." He stood, holding the passenger door open and waiting for me to get in.

"I thought you had some things to do," I dodged.

"I think I can spare a moment for this," he said, giving me a hard look. He gestured toward the passenger's seat of the car with his free hand. I sighed and went to sit in the car. Ethan closed the door firmly behind me then went around to the driver's side. He moved at a normal speed (likely because of the people nearby), giving me just enough time to work myself into a mild panic.

I had a pretty good idea what Ethan wanted to talk to me about and I really didn't know if I could say the things I ought to say or even if I *wanted* to say them. It was a little like standing on a dock in the middle of an icy lake trying to convince myself to jump into the frigid water to swim back to shore: I knew I needed to do it, but I just couldn't give myself that final push. I sat, my pulse pounding in my ears and wondering how far I would get if I made a run for it.

Coward.

Ethan opened the driver's door and paused almost imperceptibly—only a stutter in his movement. He dropped into the driver's seat, closing the door behind him. He turned in his seat to face me.

"Elly, calm down." His voice was quiet and his tone was that of a person trying to be patient with a two-year-old. I thought about slowing down my heart rate like I had before. I had to look away to do it—it would have been impossible to slow my heart if I kept looking at his face. It took a minute, but I finally got it. "Thank you," Ethan said quietly. "I'm not angry, I'm only concerned about something you said to your sister"

"Wait. Just exactly what did you do to her anyway?"

"Not much," Ethan said casually. "Just imparted a little cyan energy. I gave her a severe case of déjà vu. It's a handy tool sometimes. But you're trying to distract me. As I was saying..."

"I know what you're about to say: I have no choice but to let you stay."

He had said he wasn't angry, but the way he glared at me said something entirely different.

"Exactly," he said impatiently. "What did you mean by 'if you let us handle this'? Surely you're not thinking of asking us to leave? What would be the point in that? They would kill you

if we left.” He stopped abruptly and winced, pressing his lips together.

“And you know *you’ll* be dead if you stay,” I countered. “What would be the point of *that*? At some time—sooner or later—you will die here and you don’t even know when that time will come. Did it occur to you that I may be able to take care of myself now that I know what to watch for?” I let anger colour my tone too, hoping it would distract him. Of course, that would only work if me being angry meant anything to him.

Ethan’s eyes narrowed and he leveled a fiercely suspicious look at me. After a moment he said, “You play conversations as though they are a chess game. It’s a rather formidable talent.”

Busted.

I didn’t say anything. I only turned away guiltily, unable to hold his gaze.

“You should know those tactics won’t work on me. They may work with humans since you can anticipate what your opponent is about to say, and problem-solve fast enough to remain in control of the conversation, but don’t forget: I can shift too.”

“Can’t blame me for trying.” I sighed, resigning myself to defeat.

“Just make certain you use that power for good,” Ethan cautioned. “I’d hate to see what could happen if you misused it.” His voice softened, and I thought I saw him fight a grin. “Now, what are you working so hard to convince me of?”

To go home. To stay with me.

I knew perfectly well what I needed to do now, I just didn’t know if I could do it. Consequently, my endeavor was half-hearted at best.

“I want you to go home.” My voice had trailed off by the end of the statement. I studied my hands. I felt guilty—I wasn’t even trying to convince him to go—not really. It was so selfish.

Ethan turned to look out the window.

“Why?” Ethan asked like he already knew the answer.

“Because you’re not safe here,” I answered quietly. “I don’t want you hurt. I want you to go home.”

“No,” Ethan said in a gentle but firm tone. He turned back to me. “That would be the equivalent of a death sentence for you. Or worse. I’m sure you know you can’t actually manage things on your own. I can survive here for a time yet.”

I considered him for a moment or two and watched as his eyes turned the dark green of shady leaves. They were endlessly deep, and I watched them for a time. There was something else in his eyes too. It was like peering into the past through a keyhole. Ethan abruptly turned away, and I was jarred roughly back to the present. I took a quick breath.

After several seconds, Ethan looked back at me, an anxious expression on his face. He frowned.

“I have a few things to do,” he said, his voice slightly rough. “Usually Liam runs patrols while I stay to keep an eye on you, but Theo and I will have to cover both details while Liam’s gone. I’m going to ask you to stay in your apartment until I return. Theo isn’t far off.”

“Do you have to go?” I asked quietly, turning to look out the window. Even though I wasn’t looking at him, I could still feel the familiar warmth of Ethan’s eyes on me.

“I won’t be long,” Ethan assured me. “Don’t be afraid, I can protect you better out here than I can if I stay in your apartment.”

I nodded, frowning. My heart started beating loudly.

“I’m not afraid—of them. It’s just ... what if you don’t come back?” My words came out in a whisper. I couldn’t meet his gaze. Instead, I looked down at my hands as they lay twisted

together on my lap.

Please don't make me explain that.

Ethan was silent for a moment. I heard him take a deep breath then, "This is getting complicated." Maybe he understood better than I had thought. He paused for another moment. "I need to return the car and check things out and that means I have to leave. After I drop off my car I'll be close enough should you need me. I'll be back as soon as I'm finished."

Not soon enough.

A question broke through my anxiety just then. "I thought Liam was just going to speak with your father. Why isn't he back yet?"

"Liam may be gone for a time. I believe my father was going to ask him to check into something. We need some information on this situation which he may be able to obtain."

"Oh."

That seemed wrong somehow, like in the movies where you just know it's a bad idea for the main characters to split up to search for a way out of the strange labyrinth they're in. The idea poked at the feeling of dread again and it turned over with a silent groan, settling like a weight in my stomach.

Ethan had gotten out of the car and now stood holding my door open for me. I took Ethan's hand as he helped me up out of the car. The warmth of his hand raced up my arm.

And when it get to my heart?

The tingling reached my chest. Suddenly I couldn't breathe and fear tightened my stomach. I forced a breath into my reticent lungs and pulled my hand away, taking a quick step back. I glanced up at Ethan then down at my hand, the tingling slowly dying away. I was able breathe again. I stood there a moment, staring down at my hand and feeling winded. I lifted my gaze to Ethan then only to find myself falling into the most intense jade eyes. I took another step back.

"Okay," I said. My voice didn't sound right. I swallowed, attempting to wet my dry throat, and tried again. "What is that and will it kill me?" I asked, still trying to catch my breath.

Ethan turned away, winced and squeezed his eyes shut tightly. I waited, watching him as his face slowly relaxed and he took a breath.

"I honestly don't know," he said roughly.

"To which question?"

"Both." He paused then continued. "I need to go, Elly. I would like you to go inside now," he said quietly, still not looking at me. I could only nod.

Ethan walked me to the door of my apartment, staying well away from me. I pulled the door open and turned back to him.

"Will I see you later?" I waited for his answer. He hesitated then nodded.

I turned and started walking down the hallway. The door clicked shut behind me. It sounded louder than it usually did. I glanced back over my shoulder in time to see Ethan turn and hurry to his car.

Yep, definitely getting complicated.

Chapter 10: An Afternoon with Ethan

Evidently, Jess had found her own reassurances in her brief exchange with Ethan. I was expecting an unending interrogation when I returned to the apartment, but Jess asked few questions as she gathered her things and stuffed them into her oversized bag, preparing for her shift at the restaurant. Most of the questions she did ask focused on whether Ethan and Liam would be around to watch me as closely as she felt necessary. These sorts of questions were easily answered and the answers seemed to satisfy Jess. I specifically avoided any lengthy descriptions of the creatures stalking me, thinking it would likely be counter-productive.

I insisted Jess take the car to work. It would be a pleasant enough afternoon but it would be late evening before she was finished her shift. She hesitated only briefly—just long enough to give me her best *what-have-you-done-this-time* look—and grabbed her keys on the way out.

I now stood in the middle of the living room, looking around the hollow apartment. For several minutes I stared at the thin sliver of sunlight where it spilled onto the floor, watching as it pulled away from the kitchen and retreated out the window from where it had come. I stood wondering if—hoping—Ethan might spring out of thin air (not impossible, after all).

I waited, listening to the soft echoing hum of the refrigerator. When Ethan didn't materialize, I decided I was likely on my own for the next while. I thought of a dozen things I needed to do but couldn't bring myself to do any of them, even though the thought of doing nothing irritated me. I wondered again when Ethan would be back. He could come across chaeli or get sick or who knows what. I spent the next few minutes fuming over the thought that I should have gone with him. I frowned, wondering if this was how Jess felt when I was out.

I sighed heavily and went to my room. Thinking I might distract myself with some reading, I grabbed several texts and dropped them onto my desk with a loud thud. After a second look at the stack of texts, I decided I needed something to eat. I went back to the kitchen, made myself a cheese and lettuce sandwich and a cup of tea and brought it back to my room. I slumped down into the chair in front of my desk and flipped open the topmost text, taking a sip of my tea.

I stared at the words on the page, trying to turn them into actual sentences. It was like a hamster running on its wheel: I kept reading the same words over and over again without understanding any of it. After a wasted half hour, I pushed the text aside and grabbed my half-eaten sandwich. I took a bite and almost gagged. It had become a nasty mix of crunchy and slimy as the surface of the bread dried hard and the inside absorbed the moisture from the lettuce. Add the rubbery cheese and I had officially reached my gag threshold.

This is why I wait tables instead of cooking.

I pushed the sandwich aside and chased it down with a mouthful of tepid tea whose flavour had long since come and gone. I drained the last of the tea anyway and sat staring into my empty teacup, wondering what else I could do to fill my time.

A flash of movement and a scuffling noise at the window made me jump. I didn't look and I didn't think—I moved—*fast*. I half turned as I bolted toward my bedroom door, whipping my cup in the direction of the window without bothering to aim. I was halfway to the door of my

room when I halted in midstride, the scene at the window finally registering in my brain. I turned to see Theo standing by the window with my cup securely in his hand and Ethan standing next to him, both grinning widely.

“Sorry,” Ethan said unrepentantly, “we didn’t mean to startle you. We didn’t know where you were.”

Theo tossed the cup into the air and caught it again laughing quietly. “Nice work. You almost got my head with this. Heavy too,” he said considering the cup as he weighed it in his hand. “Would have made a pretty good dent. You likely would have made the door before I caught up to you.” He stood grinning at me.

It took me a full second to run through all of the emotions careening around in my head: surprise, irritation, amusement, resentment, relief. I settled on relief.

“You’re back,” I breathed, my eyes fixed on Ethan. His grin dissolved and he nodded once. I checked the impulse to run up to him and throw my arms around him.

Tempting, but wrong.

“Wait a minute!” I said, looking from Ethan to my bedroom window and back again. “Did you guys just come through my *window*?”

“Of course. It was the best option,” Ethan answered as though that fact should need no explanation.

“But ... okay First: we’re two stories up. Second: the window’s closed.”

Ethan casually glanced at the window then at me. Theo gave me a quizzical frown.

“Well, sure,” Theo said, uncertainly. “We closed it again.” When I only stared blankly at him, he tried to clarify, speaking slowly and clearly as though that would help. “We jumped up to the window, opened it, and climbed in, then we closed the window again.”

I stood, looking at Theo as I tried to somehow make that work in my head. Jump, defy gravity, open a locked window, climb in silently, close the window, and catch the cup before it collides with your head.

Apparently in Theo’s world that makes perfect sense.

I turned to Ethan hoping he might be able to elaborate, but didn’t get to my question. Ethan stood, watching my face closely, his wary expression prompting another thought to spring into my mind.

“You’ve done this before,” I said. It was half accusation, half statement.

Ethan met my gaze cautiously. He nodded twice, keeping his eyes riveted on my face. I closed my eyes and shook my head, feeling my stomach tighten and a slight pressure building in my head. I opened my eyes and leveled a cool look at Ethan. He took a step forward, holding out one hand pleadingly.

“Elly, I’m very sorry that we invaded your privacy,” he said, speaking quickly. “We only came in to check on you. You were often restless in the night and we worried about what was happening. We would never have taken that liberty under any other circumstance. Please forgive the intrusion.”

I stood there, trying to figure out what he was talking about for a full ten seconds before I finally understood the disconnect.

“That’s not it at all,” I said, shaking my head. “I’m not upset with you for coming into my room. I *know* why you did that. I’m upset because you never told me you were here. You never gave me the option of participating—not even giving me the courtesy of letting me know what was happening. A pretty high-handed approach if you ask me,” I huffed. “You should have told

me what was happening. I could help, you know.”

“*Told you?*” Ethan said in a scarily controlled tone as he cast me an astonished look. “*Participate? Help?* Elly, it’s not a simple matter to remain concealed while closely protecting someone. It requires a rather significant expenditure of effort—especially when the person being protected is *you*. The whole point of all of our efforts was to *keep* you from becoming involved. You shouldn’t even have *seen* us much less have known what was happening. And you most *certainly* should not be *helping!*” He turned away, shaking his head. “This assignment isn’t going at all as I planned.”

“It’s not your fault. I’m more of a freak than you thought,” I said quietly. I decided it would be prudent not to pursue the not telling me thing. Ethan only studied me for several long moments.

Perhaps a change in subject is in order.

“So . . . ,” I began a little hesitantly. “How *did* you get in my window?” I asked, turning my attention to the window.

“It’s easy if you eliminate the pull of gravity,” Theo said eagerly, taking a step forward. “We shifted and jumped up to the window. When we were level with the window ledge, we shifted further up—you know—sped up—to slow the pull of gravity. After that it was just a matter of opening the window. Locks aren’t a problem if you add a little energy to them. We climbed in and shut the window again.”

Of course. Why didn’t I think of that?

“Why didn’t you just use the door?” I asked.

“This was simpler,” Theo shrugged.

I considered the window a moment.

“Do you think *I* could jump into windows?” I asked.

“Probably,” Ethan muttered.

“Would you teach me sometime?” I asked. Ethan hesitated.

“Elly,” he began in a disapproving tone but then abruptly closed his mouth. I waited. “Sometime perhaps,” he replied reluctantly. “I suppose it shouldn’t be too risky as long as you can stay within your frequency. It takes a fair bit of control, however. You have to get quite close to our frequency for it to work. First you would need to learn to shift and to control your frame.”

I thought about shifting and windows for a moment then considered Ethan.

“You’re not in my time frame, are you?”

“No.” He glanced anxiously at my bedroom door.

“Don’t worry, no one will hear me talking to phantoms. Jess is at work.”

“Good,” Ethan said with relief in his tone. “I wouldn’t want to explain that to her as well. We’re going to be staying in this upper frame for the most part until Liam returns,” he said, turning back to the business at hand. “It’s the only way to see the chaeli. This is the frame they usually operate in. Besides, we’ll need to stick close to you, and I don’t want to cause Jessica further concern with our constant presence. It’s likely best if she doesn’t know we’re here.”

“What’s Liam trying to find out?”

“What the chaeli’s purpose is. We can’t understand why they are being so persistent in their pursuit of you. Other times they have made a hasty retreat once they knew cians were involved. They are not brave nor are they resolute—usually. We’re also concerned because they are becoming more organized. They typically have a looser command system, but orders seem to be

coming from somewhere high up in the ranks—someone who knows what they’re doing—and those orders are being followed to the letter. If we knew their motivation we may have a clue as to what we need to do to stop the attacks. Liam is trying to find out what’s going on.”

“How is he going to do that? He can’t just walk up to the enemy and ask for their help,” I said.

Ethan and Theo exchanged a grin then both of them burst out laughing.

“Actually,” Ethan said, still smiling, “he may do precisely that if I know Liam.” He continued to chuckle for a moment.

“You’re joking, right?” I asked uncertainly. Ethan sobered.

“Liam has some ... connections he wanted to look up,” Ethan explained. “They may know what’s happening.”

“Is that dangerous for him? I don’t want him taking risks because of me. I know I can’t do this for myself, but I hate being the one to put all of you in danger.” I shook my head and frowned. “I don’t like asking this of you and I don’t like this plan.”

Ethan fixed a stern expression on me and I met it in kind.

“I honestly don’t know what risk there may be, nor do I know how much risk Liam will take on himself, although I suspect it would be considerable if he felt it was necessary. It was Liam’s choice and he left knowing the risks he faced better than any of us could. You’re not making anyone do anything—each of us *chose* to do this.” Ethan turned away, his expression pensive. He looked back at me and added, “Elly, you have to trust us—Liam knows what he’s doing. He can handle this—likely better than I could.”

I heaved an exasperated sigh.

“That just makes me feel more guilty,” I said with a touch of petulance in my voice.

“You have no choice in the matter,” Ethan said sternly.

My eyes flashed to meet his but I didn’t stand a chance in this battle of wills.

“Fine,” I responded tersely then countered with: “So ... if we’re waiting for Liam to get back, you have some time to teach me some shifting control—right?”

Ethan and Theo exchanged glances. Ethan shook his head.

“*You* should be studying,” Ethan said as if he were issuing a directive. “I don’t want you getting behind in your classes. Midterms will be coming up soon and you need to be ready. *I* will be in the other room making certain nothing happens.”

What? No way.

“I already tried studying,” I said, shaking my head decisively, “It didn’t work. Next.”

“Well,” Ethan said, frowning at me, “what would you normally do with a free afternoon?”

“Go for a walk maybe. It’s a beautiful fall day. I could do the afternoon shifted up and you could teach me some control. Besides, I have about a million questions about how all this stuff works.”

“Bad idea, Ethan,” Theo said quietly, casting me a disapproving look. I ignored that. “The less she knows, the better.” I ignored that too.

Ethan, considered Theo for several seconds.

“Elly ... ,” Ethan hesitated, frowning at me. “You’re human. You should stay in your own frame.”

“But both you and Liam said some control would benefit all of us,” I countered.

Ethan sighed heavily.

“I suppose teaching you a few basics won’t hurt,” he hedged.

“*Aithen!*” Theo objected. “What are you thinking?”

“What would you have me do, Theo?” Ethan asked with some frustration. “She’s already gotten into our frequency by accident once. The next time she could very well shift herself right off a cliff. I can’t risk leaving her in that situation.” Theo nodded a reluctant agreement. Ethan turned to me.

“All right, we’ll teach you some basic control,” Ethan said reluctantly. “There’s a park not far from here. We can practice on our way there and find a secluded area to show you a few shifts. You’ll need to change into more appropriate clothes—think running and acrobatics.” I nodded. “Theo and I will wait in the living room while you change,” Ethan directed as he headed toward my bedroom door with Theo close behind him.

I raced around my room frantically looking for something appropriate to wear. It was like a small tornado had blown through my drawers and closet, spewing clothes onto the chair, desk, and floor. Eventually I found what I needed: yoga pants and a T-shirt. I pulled off my jeans, tossing them onto the floor along with a myriad of other discarded clothes and grabbed my yoga pants. In my rush to pull them on my toe got hung up halfway down the leg and I bounced onto my bed, trying to pull the pant leg over my foot. Frustrated and in a hurry, my heart rate picked up, and suddenly I could hear the muted conversation in the next room. With just a bit more concentration, the words became louder and more distinct as I listened to Ethan and Theo talking. I shouldn’t have listened—I felt guilty doing it—but I did it anyway.

“*Naed allt iawn, Faetar?*” I heard Theo say.

“English, Theo,” Ethan responded absently.

“*Hvid? Niet hinomé ni,*” Theo asked. Ethan sighed heavily.

“Because, Theo, I don’t want any more of our culture crossing into human time than is absolutely necessary. Besides, we of all cians should be embracing this culture, not avoiding it.”

“I suppose so,” Theo admitted reluctantly. There was a pause before he continued. “All right then: Father is going home as soon as he speaks with Liam, isn’t he?”

“Yes. He still won’t stay long.”

“You should go home too,” Theo said. “You’ve been here a long time.”

“I’m fine. Besides, you know I can’t leave them.”

“*Won’t leave,*” Theo replied with a hint of petulance. “Will or Sam could handle this assignment.”

“I don’t want to ask it of either of them. The risks are greater for them.”

“You need to leave while you still can,” Theo urged.

“I’m still shifting well,” Ethan asserted. “I’m certain I’ll be fine for some time yet.”

“That’s not what I mean,” Theo sulked. “Maybe it’s already too late.” There was a long pause.

“It’s not too late,” Ethan said quietly sounding like he were trying to convince himself. “It can’t be too late,” he said as if it were a command.

“*Aithen,* you know what it did to him. You know where this ends,” Theo said with a hint of desperation in his voice.

“Yes, Theo, I am painfully aware of what it did to him,” Ethan replied sharply. “I’ve seen that look in his eyes every day since—. Believe me when I say I’m doing everything in my power to keep it from happening again.”

“What did father say?”

“He’s trusting me to do the right thing. I’ll leave when the assignment is done.” Ethan’s tone was anything but confident.

I didn’t want to hear more. I calmed my racing heart and brought myself into a slower

frame. I felt sick. I was dressed and ready to go, but I stood for several long moments, sorting the words in my head, trying to breathe and wondering if I needed to get myself to the bathroom.

I managed a few good breaths and fought back the nausea threatening to overtake me. I drew myself up and squared my shoulders. If this was all the time I had with Ethan, I wasn't about to squander it on self-pity or fear. Besides, I didn't hear any fat lady singing just yet. I rearranged my face into something more appropriate for the afternoon at hand, took a steadying breath, and headed for the living room.

The conversation stopped abruptly when I entered the room and both Ethan and Theo turned to look at me. I looked at Ethan. He studied me for a moment then forced a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes.

"Are you ready?" he asked. I nodded. "We should shift *before* we go outside. Can you do it?"

I thought for a moment, my brow puckering as I stood, focusing on my breathing and listening for Ethan's heart at the same time. This time I could feel the point at which I changed time frames. I felt a subdued shiver start at my head and course down to my feet as though energy was being grounded into the floor. I immediately felt ... *lighter*—more free to move. I could feel every nerve impulse and the muscles those nerves controlled. There was time between the intent to move my limbs and the moment at which they moved. It was in that newly found time, I realized I could plan the move and execute it precisely.

"Is this right?" I asked, glancing up at Ethan.

"Perfect. You're catching on quickly," he said with a sober smile. "Now, let's see if you can hold your frame while we're out. It won't be easy. Also, we'll be out in public so try not to run into anyone," he said grinning at me as he ushered me toward the door. "First, why don't you see if you can get us out of here?"

"Oh wait," I said as a thought hit me. "I should leave Jess a note to let her know where I am." I moved toward the counter, adjusting for the slight disconnect between thought and movement. My motions felt uncoordinated and slow but I didn't think they actually were. I grabbed a pen and scribbled a quick note about going out with Ethan for the afternoon then dropped it on the table where Jess would be certain to see it. I turned and took a step toward Ethan then stopped and looked back at the note.

"Is the note in her frame or mine?"

"It moved back to her frame when you let go of it. She'll be able to see it."

"Just how does that work exactly?" I asked with no small amount of confusion.

So many rules!

Theo answered. "Small objects pick up our energy and shift with us if we're in contact with them. They go back to their normal time frame when you let go of them. Basically, you cut off their energy supply and they slow down." He smirked and continued. "How do you think we stay clothed while we shift?"

I looked at him.

"Oh, right," I said meekly.

Hadn't thought about that ...

My cheeks flushed at the thought of shifting without the benefit of clothing. Ethan laughed quietly. I smiled at him sheepishly very aware of the warmth spreading on my cheeks. I shook my head and walked over to the door. I stared at it for a moment and came up with nothing.

"What am I supposed to do?"

“Just open it like you normally would, then close it behind us. If we do this right, no one will see or hear the movement. Likely there won’t be anyone in the hall anyway but it’s good practice.”

“Won’t the door disappear when I touch it?”

“No, it’s attached to the building, so it’s too big. We can’t shift very large objects. We can’t put out that much energy.”

I frowned up at Ethan.

“Allow me,” Ethan said with a smile. He took hold of the door handle. “This type of door is relatively easy,” he said. “Just shift up and go the instant I have the door open for you. Ready?” He looked down at me and I could see amusement in his sea-green eyes.

I nodded. Sure I was ready.

Ethan opened the door, then closed it after we had all filed out. It wasn’t any different than doing it in human time, but the elderly lady in the hallway didn’t even glance at us as we stepped out—she just kept walking, seemingly in slow motion. We moved around her like lava flowing past a rock. When we reached the outside door, Ethan gestured for me to open it. I did the same thing he had shown me and we stepped outside. The businessman walking past didn’t appear to take any notice of us, and we moved past him too.

I surveyed the area outside my door as though seeing the outside world for the first time. To my eyes it looked like a hazy layer of sheer fabric had been lifted from the world, revealing brighter colours and releasing more vibrant sounds. The day was bright with a cool breeze. As I stood in the sunlight, eyes closed and face lifted to the sun, I could feel the heat strike my face while the breeze wrapped itself gently around my bare arms, leaving goose bumps in its wake. Sunlight flashed a brilliant dappled orange behind my eyelids, and I could smell the cool white breeze as it carried a myriad of smells past my face.

“Theo,” I heard Ethan say. I opened my eyes. “I’d like you to go home to get some rest.”

“But ... ,” Theo began, gaping at Ethan.

Ethan shook his head.

“I want you well rested. You will have to cover Liam’s detail until he gets back. I can handle the next little while, but I’ll need you back by sundown.”

“*Ond, Aithen ...*,” Theo replied more urgently this time, frowning.

“Get some rest Theo,” Ethan said firmly. “I’ll handle this.” Theo glanced at me then back at Ethan. It looked like there was more he wanted to say, but instead he only frowned and walked away. Ethan watched him leave then took a deep breath. He paused a moment before turning back to me.

“You did well with the door,” Ethan said approvingly as he began leading the way to the park.

“It’s all really confusing though. I mean which objects shift with us and which don’t?” I asked as I followed him down the street, dodging people, cars, and small animals.

“It may help if you view it in terms of energy flow.”

“What does energy have to do with time?” I looked at him dubiously.

I stopped walking then, wondering where I should go next as two families walked toward us taking up the entire sidewalk. Ethan came to stand close to me as the large group approached.

“Are you certain they can’t see us?” I whispered to him.

He chuckled. His laugh in this frame was a perfectly smooth blend of notes and echoed in my ears like a distantly remembered tune.

“I’m certain,” Ethan said as the group of people drew nearer. “I know how you feel, though.

I remember it being a little disconcerting the first few times I did this. Don't worry, you'll get used to it."

"Wait a minute," I said. "I can hear what they're saying." They were talking about the activities their children were in. "Why isn't their speech all garbled? I mean, shouldn't it sound like a record dragging?"

"A what?"

You have to be kidding me. Just how well does he know human culture anyway?

"A sound recording. One that's going too slow."

"Oh, you mean a gramophone."

I cast him a sideways glance.

"Uhh, sure," I said, wondering if he was in need of a little remedial human history. "So I'm shifted up, right? Why can I still hear them clearly?"

"Sound travels extremely fast. It takes quite a lot to slow it down. We're simply not in a high enough frame for that to happen. Besides, in the higher frames you also have more time to collect the sound waves. With more sound waves collected your brain can mentally piece them together and shape them into words. Humans actually do that all the time. A person can hear several times faster than another person can speak. The rest of the time, the person listening is just waiting and filling in the blanks. You can collect more light too in the higher frames. That's why you can still see everything in the upper frames even if it's dark. In fact, we can usually hear and see more than a normal person would since we have more time for our senses to collect the information."

Ethan dodged a small girl riding her bike down the sidewalk toward us and I giggled.

Sure, more than a match for a sword wielding chaeli, but a little girl on a bicycle ...

After he had successfully outmaneuvered the child and I had made my way around the others, I said, "Okay, so you were explaining about energy and time." Ethan nodded.

"Think about physics when you think about time and energy," he began. "The more time you have, the more energy passes through the object during that time and the faster its molecules move—just like we do when we move up into a higher time frame. We can access more time so we can collect more energy. When we touch objects, some of our energy is transferred to the molecules in the object, making the object shift along with us."

"Wait," I interrupted, "wouldn't the object just melt if all its molecules are vibrating fast enough to shift?"

Ethan shook his head.

"Not necessarily, although that's possible if you directed the energy to heat energy. I believe it was one of your own physicists who determined all energy forms are equivalent. Energy doesn't disappear, it simply converts to another form: moving, potential, heat, gravitational, elastic, electromagnetic, even sound energy. They're all interchangeable. We can add *time* to that list. You can choose which type of energy you add or take away from an object. We can give an object any type of energy if we choose. We can warm objects—like I did to your bicycle—and we can also alter gravitational energy—like we did getting into your window. We can use any form of energy, but we mostly use time energy."

"Okay, I think I get it," I said, still trying to sort some of the ideas as we continued on to the park. Ethan took us on a direct path to the park, cutting across streets, weaving among groups of people, and catapulting himself over cars. The people around us didn't pay any attention to Ethan as he danced his way among them.

Show off.

We walked past a boy catching a ball, the ball frozen in mid-air. We saw a runner, air-borne in mid stride. Traffic lights didn't change and bicycles didn't move, still perfectly balanced as though suspended on wires. I didn't feel I was quite up to jumping over cars yet so I was forced to make my way around the vehicles instead. Ethan turned and waited patiently as I picked my way along after him.

When we reached the park, Ethan stepped off the path and headed toward a row of hedges. "Come this way," he called back over his shoulder as he squeezed through a narrow opening in the bushes. Reaching back to take my hand, he pulled me through after him. On the other side of the hedge was a small, grassy area with a rocky patch just beyond. Interspersed among the football sized rocks on the ground were several larger boulders spaced a short distance from one another. Ethan turned to me, hands on his hips.

"You're doing well holding your frame. Very good," he said, nodding approvingly. "Do you want to learn some simple jumps? It might come in handy if you're caught in a tight situation."

Stupid question.

"Of course," I replied, as though he had just asked if I wanted a trip around the world.

Ethan inclined his head toward me, took two steps back, and flung himself into a back flip. He landed on his hands, pushing off again to launch himself back into the air and land on his feet—on one of the large boulders. I eyed him skeptically.

"I thought you said 'simple' jumps. I'll likely kill myself if I try that. I'm not even certain that's physically possible."

Ethan chuckled.

"I assure you it is," he said, "but we can start with something easier if you would prefer."

"Easier would be better, thank you."

"All right then, why don't you climb up onto this rock to begin with? You can start by learning how to decrease the pull of gravity as you jump down. You'll need that skill for all of the jumps."

I walked over to the rock on which he stood. The top of it almost reached my shoulders. I stood in front of it, wondering how on earth I was even going to get up there. Before I saw any movement, Ethan was on the ground beside me. He put his hands around my waist and effortlessly lifted me up onto the top of the rock. My heart lurched into a gallop when he touched me, but he let go of me just as that tingling sensation began.

I crouched down on top of the rock, a little unbalanced as the colours and sounds of this frame assaulted my senses. I could hear the multi-coloured wind-chime sound of children's laughter coming from a nearby playground and the soft pulse against my eardrum as a bird fluttered its wings. The wind playing in the leaves made a kaleidoscope sound like a waterfall. The clapping bark of a distant dog punctuated the other sounds as it broke through the steady roar of nearby traffic. Put all these sounds together, and it made me want to put my hands over my ears.

The view from where I perched on the rock looked like it had been created by an ambitious five year old armed with every known colour of crayon. What had once been simple green leaves on trees were now a shock of greens and yellows as though every green and yellow crayon had been held together and melted, letting the wax drop onto paper in a mosaic of coloured drops. As for the colour of the sky, well, there is no colour of blue reproduced by man

that could replicate the intense blue I now saw above me—it was the colour of light.

“That’s too fast, Elly,” Ethan cautioned.

I was taken aback by the smooth texture of his voice in this frame—as though every word he spoke was in perfect pitch, creating a sound wave that didn’t strike the eardrum but caressed it. I heard two beating hearts and stood, motionless, listening as the beats fell into rhythm with one another. “Well done,” Ethan commented when I had slowed down. “You’re picking this up quickly.”

“Is this the way your world looks?” I asked incredulously.

“Like the higher frames?” he asked. I nodded. “Sometimes. More or less.”

“Where do you live exactly—I mean, do you have cities like this or do people live in the country like the lane I shifted to?”

“We have both.”

“Where does your family live?” I asked.

Ethan sighed and hesitated before he answered, studying me for a moment.

“We have a home in the country—a small estate—a farm.”

“You run a farm *and* help all us defective humans?” I asked skeptically.

“We have help.”

“With which?”

“Both.”

“Does your mother help? I’ve never heard you mention her.”

“My mother died when I was quite young.”

Way to go, bonehead. Think before you speak next time.

“Oh. I’m sorry,” I said a bit lamely.

“Me too,” Ethan said quietly. “Are you going to jump down or stand up there all day asking questions?”

“Right,” I said looking down and feeling my stomach twist. “Slowing gravity. Ummm ... , they didn’t cover that one in physics class. Just how does one go about doing that exactly?”

Ethan chuckled.

“Actually, you’ve already done the hardest part. You’ve shifted up high enough that things will pretty much take their own course if you let them. Just step off the rock and see what happens.”

I looked down again.

Dumb thing to do, I guess.

It seemed a long way down. I hesitated. It wasn’t actually that far of a drop, but still ... I didn’t usually go around jumping off boulders. I turned down one corner of my mouth.

“You’ll be fine Elly,” Ethan assured me. “Just relax. It won’t be necessary, but do you need me to catch you the first time?”

Need is such a funny word. We always say we *need* something when we really only mean we very much *want* something. But in that sense, yes, I *needed* him to catch me. I nodded. Ethan moved to stand where I could easily reach him, then lifted his hands up toward me and waited. I took a deep breath and stepped off the rock with a little hop.

I was expecting a sharp drop once my feet left the rock but that didn’t happen. The ground didn’t come flying up at me. It wasn’t like *falling*, it was more like I was *stepping* down onto the ground. I was moving so slowly during the ‘fall’ I had plenty of time to place my feet precisely for a balanced, coordinated landing without even the slightest jarring or jostling. Ethan reached

up to grasp my waist, needlessly guiding me down.

“Okay,” I laughed, feeling a little embarrassed. “That was entirely unexpected.”

Ethan’s eyes were the colour of tropical water when I looked up into them. I heard his heart beat faster and he dropped his hands from my waist as he took a step back. He turned away, clearing his throat and shaking his head very slightly, a frown pulling down the corners of his mouth. After a moment he turned back to me, an uncomfortable smile on his face.

“Okay. Ready for another go?” he asked.

“Sure,” I said, nodding.

“Why don’t we try going up now?” He took one step and was on top of the rock before I understood what he was doing.

“I’m not certain I even saw what you did.”

“Just step up. You’ll move easily.”

I tilted my head, taking a moment to estimate the force I would need in order to reach the top of the rock. I should have known my calculations would be off—there was no way I could adjust for a lack of gravity. I took too much of a jump and immediately saw I would sail right over the rock. The instant I realized my mistake, I slowed myself, dropping down a frame or two (I hoped) and increasing the pull of gravity.

It worked—sort of. I made a rather harsh and ungraceful landing on the rock, but at least it was on my feet—for about half a second. I lost my balance and would have fallen off the rock if Ethan hadn’t steadied me. I focused on not falling and regained my balance.

“Well, that would be wrong then,” I said, screwing up one half of my face when I could finally stand by myself again.

“Hmmm,” Ethan mused, “or entirely correct depending on what you were intending to do. Slowing down in mid jump was actually the *next* thing I was going to teach you. You’re a little ahead of the game. Why don’t you go down and try that again?”

I turned and stepped down lightly, executing a perfectly balanced landing with plenty of time to adjust my stance while my weight touched down. My landing was silent so I thought I must have done it right. I turned without putting my entire foot down, and using much less force this time, I *stepped* rather than *jumped* up onto the boulder. I came to rest right in front of Ethan without having to adjust my balance at all. It was as simple as taking a step on flat ground.

“Very nice,” Ethan said, nodding.

“I want to try something,” I said. I studied the distance to the ground for a moment. I pushed off the rock, jumping upward instead of stepping down and launching myself into the air. I tucked into a roll in mid air and pulled out of it in more than enough time to adjust my balance and land firmly on the ground. The landing was slightly heavier than it might have been, but I was on my feet and I stayed on them. I turned and smiled up at Ethan, admittedly feeling a little smug.

That was fun!

“Well done,” Ethan said, smiling widely at me.

Nice, but it wasn’t enough. What else could I do? I went up and down from the rock trying different flips, rolls, and speeds of landing both onto and off the rock until I could perform any combination of leaps and rolls relatively well. I could tuck into a roll, landing up on the rock or roll lightly into a landing on the ground. After some practice, I found I could slow myself down just before landing or even change speeds mid jump.

My body moved freely and my breathing was easier in this frame—and I *liked* it. I was so focused on the subtleties of my practice I didn’t even notice Ethan moving over to one of the

other boulders. I suddenly realized he wasn't on the rock with me anymore and spun around to find him. He sat on the next rock over, leaning back on his hands, his feet dangling over the edge. There was a sad sort of smile on his face as he sat watching me.

"This is great," I said with a low laugh. "I can see why Theo was enjoying himself in class."

"I'm glad you like it," Ethan said as his smile turned to a concerned frown. "Just what did Theo do in class?"

I stepped slowly down from the rock, landing in the area strewn with smaller rocks. I skimmed over the surface of them, stepping lightly from rock to rock, moving quickly and barely making contact with each step. When I reached Ethan's boulder I looked up at him, still grinning over my newfound skills.

"He was vaulting over students and desks," I said, wondering what else I could get Ethan to teach me. Ethan leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, his face just above my own. Consternation creased his brow.

"He shouldn't have been showing you those things," he said disapprovingly.

I wasn't paying much attention to what Ethan was saying since I seemed incapable of drawing a breath at that particular moment. Everything about Ethan was so much *more* in this time frame. I was only too aware of his nearness and there was a palpable charge in the air between us—not unlike the zing of metal on a filling—only much more pleasant. I certainly hadn't noticed *that* in my own time frame.

"Elly?"

"Yes?"

"Are you finished?" Ethan asked, arching one eyebrow. His breath swept across my face and scattered my thoughts again just when I had almost gotten them collected. I finally decoded his question, deciding he must surely have been referring to my practice—at least, that's what I chose to believe. A grin played around the corners of his mouth and settled firmly in his deep green eyes.

"Not quite," I shot back and was rewarded with Ethan's look of surprise. I grinned and continued, "I want to try some jumps on the ground," I said—just for clarification.

"Ah, I see," Ethan answered, his mouth taking on a wide smile. "All right then," he said as he lightly glided down beside me, "we should take this onto the grass. It will make for a softer landing should you miscalculate." One corner of his mouth remained twisted up as he led me to the middle of the grassy area where he turned to face me.

"Watch me," Ethan said, and took a step away from me, flashing a brilliant smile. He executed a neat back flip coming to a perfectly balanced landing on the balls of his sneakered feet.

I eyed him skeptically.

"I just can't picture myself doing that," I said with some dismay.

"It's not as difficult as it looks," Ethan reassured me. "You'll move easier than you think you will. I'll spot you just in case, but I don't think you'll need it."

There's that word again ...

Ethan came to stand beside me. "Now, jump straight up, arch backward, and land. It's easier if you can manage to slow down for the landing part of it." I regarded him doubtfully, but he nodded in encouragement. "I won't let you fall," he said reassuringly. "Go ahead."

I took a deep breath and jumped into the air, gaining more speed than I had anticipated. I arched backward but overshot the spin and started into a second turn. I panicked, picturing myself landing on my head halfway through the second turn. My fear was well justified. The

ground was rushing up to meet me. I lost my tenuous hold on my time frame and once again had to contend with full human gravity as I headed toward the ground face first.

My fall stopped abruptly, my face a good way from the ground. I felt Ethan's steel-hard arm straining against my waist, my full weight hanging from it. Thanks to Ethan's quick intervention, my feet reached the ground before my face did. The breath was knocked out of me, and my hands automatically gripped Ethan's forearm in a needless attempt to steady myself—Ethan had that part covered. I could feel the smooth lines of his taut muscles and the beginnings of that same tingling burn as it began its journey up through my hands. I was disappointed to discover it moved more slowly in this frame.

Ethan's grip was uncompromising as he pulled me up and pressed my back to his chest, settling me into a standing position. My participation in righting myself was entirely unnecessary. Ethan gave me a moment to get my bearings as I readjusted my time frame. He leaned his head down, his cheek next to my ear as he spoke: "Are you hurt?" His voice was low in my ear, his breath swirling into my head again. I could feel the energy emanating from his chest and from where my hands still rested on his arm. I was suddenly drowning in the sensation of it. My breathing tightened as the energy moved slowly but steadily into my chest. I tried to pull in a breath but couldn't. I panicked and twisted away from Ethan, turning to face him, my thoughts an incoherent tumult as I studied his intense green eyes.

Was I hurt? Is that what he had asked?

"No, I'm fine," I managed to get out in a breathless whisper. We stood, watching each other for a moment, Ethan's green eyes cooling to a cerulean blue, and me trying to catch my breath. Ethan nodded then, his brow creasing as he turned away.

"I think we're done for today," he said in a rough voice.

Chapter 11: Unusual Talents

Ethan walked back to the rock he had been sitting on, picked up the sweater he had left there, and pulled it on. I caught a regrettably brief flash of a well-muscled abdomen when he reached up just before he tugged the sweater down over the t-shirt he wore. My eyes darted to the curved lines of bicep where the sweater hugged his arms.

Too good to be real—and in my world he isn't.

I sighed to myself, suddenly struck by the realization that Ethan did not belong here—with me. I knew whatever my voice might whisper to me about right or wrong, or even of forever, he could not stay with me. I also knew just how badly I truly *needed* him to stay—in every sense of the word.

I shivered as I watched Ethan walk back to where I stood. In my mind's eye, I saw Ethan in another time and place, turning and walking away from me. In my mind, his face was strained and sad. He walked stiffly and moved slowly, his head hung low with his shoulders uncharacteristically slumped. The pain in the scene was palpable, as if it was happening right at this moment, tearing at my heart and stopping the breath in my throat. I could feel the sting of tears welling up in my eyes as the cloying image wrapped itself around me, suffocating me like a wet cloth over my face. I gasped for breath.

I was transfixed by the image of Ethan's pained expression as he looked back at me and could only stare numbly up at the real Ethan for several long seconds. He stood watching me with the look of a man who has accidentally stepped on his dog's tail and made it yelp.

"Elly," he said with a hint of alarm. "Are you crying? What's wrong?"

I tried to focus on Ethan—tried to break free from the images that continued to play like a spastic video in an unending loop. I wiped away the single tear on my cheek and took a deep breath. I shook my head, fixing a smile on my face and mustering an enthusiasm I didn't feel.

"I'm fine," I said with as much conviction as I could manage. "For a minute there I was seeing something else." I shook my head. "It just felt real."

"What did you see?" Ethan asked, his brow drawing down.

"I saw you in another place," I began hesitantly after a moment. "You looked like you were hurt or something—at least, it sort of *felt* like you were." I replied, leaving out the part about me.

"Where was I?" he asked. I shrugged and shook my head.

"I have no idea. Not here though."

"Have you done that sort of thing before?" Ethan asked, his expression becoming even more strained.

"Um, no," I admitted.

"I think we should get you some food and some rest. I don't know what this change in frame might be doing to you."

"But I feel fine. Really. It's a nice day and I'm liking this shifting thing. I'm not ready to go home yet," I protested.

“I say you need to rest.”

“No, I’m good for a while yet,” I pressed.

Ethan cast me an irritated frown.

“You can be a little stubborn sometimes, can’t you?” he asked, annoyance in his tone.

Obviously not going for subtle there.

Fine, two could play at that game. I grinned wickedly at him. “You have no idea.” He didn’t crack so much as a grin. He only continued to frown at me. I straightened my face. “Okay, how about a compromise?” I conceded. “There’s an ice cream stand on the other side of the park. We can stay in this frame until we get ice cream, then I’ll let you take me home to get some rest.”

Ethan considered this for a moment.

“Are you certain you can manage it?”

“Absolutely.”

“All right,” Ethan replied reticently. “But you’ll tell me if anything else happens. After we get you your *ice cream* it’s straight home.”

“Deal,” I said just as I realized there was a problem. “Oh, but wait, I didn’t bring any money with me.” I sighed. “I guess we’ll have to just go home then,” I admitted petulantly.

Ethan looked at me as though I had just told him his shoes were ugly.

“At present,” he said, a touch of affront evident in his voice, “you are my responsibility. I had every intention of paying for the ice cream. I have it covered.”

I was about to ask him if he had money with him—human money that is—but the memory of his pained expression in my vision flashed into my mind, effectively derailing my train of thought. I stood staring at Ethan, the question I had been about to ask stuck somewhere in the back of my brain. I couldn’t quite recall what my question was, but I had a vague sensation it was still waiting to be asked.

“You were going to ask me something.” Ethan said, looking at me expectantly.

“How did you know that?”

And what else do you know?

Ethan tilted his head to the side as he studied me. “You of all people should understand how I knew that.”

“Oh, right. It just seems odd when someone else is doing it,” I said. A small smile spread onto Ethan’s face. Now, what was my question again? I rummaged around through the myriad of questions I wanted to ask him and pulled one out of a jumbled pile of thoughts.

Right: money.

“I did have a question,” I began. “How can you pay for ice cream? Do you have any money—from this world? And where would you get money? I mean you don’t have a job or anything, do you?”

“At least, not one you know of,” Ethan said teasingly, one eyebrow raised. I didn’t move, waiting for him to explain. “Why don’t we walk while I tell you about it? I’d like you to have something to eat sooner rather than later.”

“Sure. It’s this way,” I said, gesturing to the far end of the park. We started walking, generally staying off the concrete walking path, avoiding the humans moving along like snails on a highway.

“So,” I prompted when Ethan didn’t speak for a time, “you were going to tell me how you

have money?”

Ethan nodded and inhaled deeply. He sounded a bit tired. I glanced over at him.

Was he tired?

What if it wasn't me who needed to rest? The thought worried at the corner of my mind as I tried to listen to what Ethan was saying.

“... so, yes, my family keeps cash on hand for these types of assignments.”

“But how do you get it?”

“Well, it's really not difficult to build human wealth when you consider that we have had many hundreds of your years to accumulate it.”

“Hold on,” I interrupted, “what do you mean you've had hundreds of years?”

Ethan glanced at me before answering.

“You need to understand that cians have been visiting this frequency for what would be a very long time in your world. The first cian to stumble into your frequency would have been here in roughly the eleventh or twelfth century your time—if I'm remembering human history and terminology correctly. The first coordinated expeditions occurred when my grandfather was ... young.” He hesitated, seeming to choose his words carefully. “That would have been roughly four or five, maybe six hundred years ago, your time. Of course, other cians had been in your world sporadically for hundreds of years prior to that. It's —”

“Wait a minute,” I interrupted again. “If your grandfather was a young man five hundred years ago, how old are you?” I asked bluntly.

Ethan looked at me blankly.

“I don't know how to answer your question. We don't track time the way humans do.” He shrugged. “How old are you?”

“I'm twenty.”

“Years?” he clarified. I nodded. “We seem to be about the same age. I'll be twenty-three years then. That's just a little older than you, right?”

“Sure, but how old are you according to *my* time?” I pressed.

“I honestly don't know. Let me think for a moment.” He concentrated for a few minutes before turning back to me. “The first time I came here was with my father ...” He paused then and I saw a flicker of sadness cross his face before he continued. “I was a young boy at the time. Theo—the youngest—was an infant. There was nothing here at the time except the house my father had built. The rest was only prairie. My father had purchased land from the government. They were trying to populate the country and few questions were asked at the time. People were just beginning to establish a government, but no leadership existed yet. I remember my father explaining that to me at the time. I also remember my father relating stories he had heard from travelers about a fire in a major city far to the south and the stirrings of political unrest further south. Does that help?”

“We didn't have a Prime Minister until 1867, so it would have been prior to that time. You may mean the San Francisco fire. That was in 1850.” I stopped walking and my mouth gaped open as that sank in. Ethan had to retrace a couple of steps to get back to me. “If you were a boy at that time, it would mean that you're over one hundred and sixty years old!”

“No,” Ethan corrected, “*I'm* twenty-three. Your *world* is one hundred and sixty years older.”

I continued to gape. “How long do cians live?”

“I really can't answer that any way that would make sense to you,” Ethan said, making a face. “Let's see ... , we usually live to see four full generations—my great grandfather is quite

elderly but still living. Does that give you some perspective?”

“Well, generally for us humans to see four generations, we would need to live one hundred years—at least. Your years are what—fifteen times as long?” My mouth gaped open again and I gawked at Ethan incredulously. “You live for fifteen hundred years?!! That’s one and a half millennia!”

Ethan shrugged casually. “Maybe, if that’s what your calculations say. But that’s human years, not cian time. The two are very different and we don’t keep track.”

I stood staring at him, trying to come to grips with this revelation. It was no wonder this was just a job to him. How on earth could one puny human be of any consequence to a person whose life spanned more than a thousand years—maybe two? All of this: the buildings, the cars, the people—*me*—must seem so terribly ... *temporary*.

And he knows that.

He would exist long after I was gone. His life would move on and he would forget all about me—forget about this moment in time. I swallowed hard and turned away. I don’t know what my face showed, but Ethan ducked down to catch my eye.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “Does this subject upset you?”

I couldn’t meet his gaze and continued to study the trees off to the side of the path.

“It’s not the subject that bothers me. I just had a glimpse of my own insignificance.” Even I could hear the harsh edge to my words.

Ethan didn’t say anything for a moment or two. When he finally did speak, his voice was quiet and gentle. “You are many things, Elly, but insignificant is not one of them.”

I glanced up at him but he had already looked away. We stood silently for a time, both of us apparently riding out our own mental turbulence. After a long pause, Ethan turned back to me.

“So,” Ethan began in a well-controlled tone, “you were intent on ice cream?” I nodded. He turned and began to walk and I fell in step beside him. “Just what is *ice cream* anyway?” Ethan asked.

“You don’t know what ‘ice cream’ is?” I asked.

He gave me a sideways glance.

“No. Cians don’t eat often and we don’t generally take human foods back to our time.”

We came to a soccer field where teams of young boys were playing, their parents poured into folding chairs on the sidelines. Ethan and I stopped behind the line of spectators and stood watching the players. I could see them moving, but like everyone else, they were going in slow motion.

Ethan took several steps out onto the field and into the middle of the game, taking the direct route toward the opposite side of the field. He turned back to see if I was following him. I looked at the parents sitting on the sidelines and at the slow moving players. I took a breath and stepped onto the field.

I followed Ethan to the far side of the field, glancing around to see if any of the parents had seen us, but no one was looking at us. Ethan dodged the slow-moving players, stopping to redirect a wayward shot from one of the smaller boys and sending the ball toward the goal. He reached the other side and turned to make sure I was still with him.

“That was very kind of you—helping that boy,” I commented when I had reached the side of the field.

“It was a small thing,” he said with a shrug as he turned and continued across the park.

When we reached a secluded spot, Ethan suggested we shift down into a human frame. It took me a moment to remember just how that was done. I finally reached a normal frame and

frowned to myself, disappointed by the dullness of it in all regards. I lifted my face toward the sunlight, closing my eyes and seeking out its warmth, but it was colder in this frame—quieter too, like I was listening to the world from under water.

I opened my eyes to find Ethan staring at me with vibrant green eyes the colour of sun-splashed leaves. I started, instinctively taking a step back from him. I shivered. Ethan turned away and cleared his throat.

“Cold?” he asked.

“A little,” I nodded. “There’s not as much heat from the sun in this frame.”

Ethan looked up then back at me, his eyes having cooled to a teal colour.

“Here, put this on,” he offered, talking off his sweater and holding it out to me.

I hesitated, but only briefly. I took the sweater and pulled it on over my t-shirt, feeling its warmth and reveling in Ethan’s scent still lingering in its fibers.

Lovely.

“Thank you,” I said as I tugged up the too-long sleeves. Ethan stood in front of me, shaking his head very slightly, his brow drawn down. “Something wrong?” I asked, glancing around to see if I had shifted again. Nope, everything was still dull.

“No,” Ethan said quietly, the quizzical expression still on his face, “it’s just that I For a moment it felt like I had seen you do that a million times before.” He paused, wincing and shaking his head. He turned and we continued on to the ice cream stand.

When we got back to the apartment, Ethan walked me upstairs. He saw me to the door but didn’t come in. Instead, he left to find Theo so they could “ensure things were quiet outside”. I closed and locked the door while Ethan waited in the hallway—this was at his insistence—then wrestled momentarily with the pull of panic as I heard Ethan’s footsteps retreat down the hall. I felt like one of those old metal jack-in-the-boxes about to spring. I took a few deep breaths, pulled myself together, and went to find some supper.

I reheated some soup Jess had made and sat down at the table with it. I poked around in the bowl with my spoon, but all I could think of was the ice cream I had just eaten. That made me think of the rest of the afternoon: vaults, slow moving people, living hundreds of years—the list went on. Every time I tried to put a spoonful of soup in my mouth I half expected it to be (or maybe hoped it was) ice cream. That didn’t translate well and I wound up throwing out the soup, having barely touched it.

I went to my room to study but I couldn’t focus on my notes. My mind kept skipping around to the sights and sounds in the higher frames—including the sight and sound of Ethan. After re-reading the same set of notes twice without being able to recall any part of them, I gave up and went to watch television. I countered the guilt I felt over not studying with the argument that it was early in the school year and I would have plenty of time to catch up before exams. I let myself fall down onto the couch, grabbed the remote and fired it at the television. I lay on the couch, flipping through the channels, but couldn’t get decent reception on any of them.

Stupid peasant-vision.

I gave up, turned off the television and laid my head down on the arm of the couch. Jess and I had found the couch at a garage sale and had bought it because it was perfectly suited to napping, the arm of the couch providing the perfect cushion for your head and neck. I was tired and the couch seemed particularly comfortable after my adventurous afternoon. My last thought before I drifted off had something to do with paying for that tomorrow.

The next thing I knew I was forcing myself into a sitting position, trying to see through the fog of sleep that hadn't yet cleared from my head. The room spun and my pulse pounded in my temples. I sat, trying to pull the doubled image of Ethan's anxious expression into one.

"Elly, are you all right?" he was asking—it sounded like he was speaking from a long way off, even though his hand was on my arm and his face was inches from my own. I fought to bring him into focus as my heart continued its frantic race.

"Yeah, I'm up," I muttered out of long habit from Jess' interventions.

"I told you she was just sleeping," I heard Theo say. "That's the one thing I do remember: humans are always sleeping."

"Sorry," I mumbled from behind my hands, rubbing my face and trying to clear some of the muddle from my brain. "I must have dozed off."

"That's fine," Ethan said, moving back to stand beside Theo. "I was concerned when I saw you lying there. We came across a few more chaeli on our way back."

"No, I'm good—just tired," I said as I finally pulled Ethan's image into focus.

Both Ethan and Theo now wore khakis and T-shirts with their swords strapped to their backs. I could see the handle of a knife holstered in Ethan's heavy boot. There was a sticky black smudge on the handle that I had no intention of asking about. Ethan had a long gash across his left cheek, and when I looked over at Theo, I saw he had a bruise on his temple. I gaped at them.

"What happened?!" I asked with no small amount of alarm.

"Took out a few more chaeli," Theo supplied with a smile.

"We found four of them prowling around not far from here." Ethan and Theo exchanged grins. Ethan sobered and turned back to me. "We haven't seen them this close to your apartment before. I'm worried they might have found out where you live." I frowned.

"We should clean up that cut," I offered. "Theo, do you want some ice for that bruise?" Both of them shook their heads.

"Don't bother," Theo replied lightly. "These will be gone in ... an *hour* or two."

"Does he mean a day or two?" I asked, casting Ethan a skeptical look.

"No, actually he's correct. We heal quickly. We'll be fine," Ethan said lightly before changing the subject. "So, nothing unusual happened here then?"

"No, nothing. I was just really tired. I fell asleep watching TV. Well, actually, the TV wasn't working so I turned it off then fell asleep." I could still feel the dull pull of sleep at the back of my head and fought to keep my focus.

"Of course you couldn't watch television," Theo interjected. "It doesn't work when you're shifted up."

I turned to him in vague surprise.

"I am? And why not?" I asked.

Instead of answering, Theo grinned a wicked grin as he leaned over to pick up the remote from the coffee table. He flicked on the television and turned back to watch my reaction as I watched it flicker on. I studied the screen and blinked several times trying to put together the image on the screen. I couldn't—couldn't even tell what program was on. An image would appear on the screen momentarily then the screen would go blank. The scenes alternated like that with slight changes in the image each time it flashed on the screen. The sound dragged like a record being played too slowly and I couldn't pull any actual words from it. I watched, confused for a moment, then turned to Theo.

"Explain please. Why is it doing that?" I asked.

Theo chuckled.

“*It’s* not; *you* are. It has to do with how many frames your brain can pick up in each second. It varies with the media used, but suppose the television refreshes the screen sixty times in each second. That’s the number of frames per second that are needed to make a moving picture for humans. If you’re shifted up—which you are—a lot—you have more time in each second. There aren’t enough frames to fill all of your second. The extra time—the time between frames—looks blank. You’re seeing between the frames of the picture.”

“Huh.” I watched the screen for a few seconds until Theo clicked it off.

Weird.

“But I’m not *still* shifted up, am I?” Surely I would have noticed that.

“Yeah,” Theo answered in a tone implying this ought to be obvious to me. “You’re up about six frames.” I turned to Ethan.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Actually,” Ethan began quietly, “I was curious to see if you would notice and if you would come out of it on your own. Obviously neither of those things happened.” He frowned at me for that.

“Sorry,” I said irritably. “You’d think by now I’d be doing better with this whole shifting thing.”

“It’s not your fault,” Ethan said patiently. “However, you’ve been shifted up for some time now and it’s likely making you tired. I think you should shift down to a human frame and go back to sleep.” He turned to Theo. “Theo, you’ll cover for Liam while he’s gone. You have first patrol. I’ll make certain Elly gets settled then come to relieve you in a while.” Theo glanced at me then nodded to Ethan and left—out the window.

I looked at Ethan in alarm.

“Did he just jump out the window?!”

“Of course.” Ethan shook his head then. “Elly, he slowed down before he hit the ground. Shift down please,” he directed. I thought about slowing down—it wasn’t all that difficult this time given how exhausted I was. I knew the second I was back in human time because my eyes blinked a long, slow blink. I yawned.

“When’s Liam getting back?” I asked. “Do you think he can get some information to help us?”

Ethan paused for a moment before answering.

“I honestly don’t know—to both questions. We will simply have to wait.”

“Fine. We wait then.” I frowned. My eyelids grew heavy and I rubbed them, trying to ease the gritty feeling in my eyes.

“You’re tired,” Ethan observed. “You should go to bed. You really shouldn’t shift for so long yet. You’re not accustomed to it.” I nodded, remembering what Liam had said about shifting making a person tired.

“Let’s get you to bed.” Ethan came to stand beside the couch and extended his hand to help me to my feet. I put my hand in his, my fingers sliding along the coolness of a ring he wore. I had seen the ring before, but hadn’t paid much attention to it, although I knew it was a simple gold ring with some sort of pattern engraved on it. It was the soft smoothness of it that caught my attention now.

I was caught up in the sensation of the ring for exactly an eighth of a second before I suddenly felt like I was falling. All I could think of was that feeling you get when you put your thumb on the edge of a book and flip through the pages: I could feel layers of time flying up past

me in a blinding grey blur as they peeled away in quick succession. I felt Ethan's hand tighten on mine. Then, just as quickly as it began, the sensation stopped.

I found myself standing on a hill under a clear summer sky, surrounded by green rolling hills. The sun was shining, but I couldn't feel any heat from it. I could see the wind caress the leaves of a near-by tree, but felt no breeze. I could still feel Ethan's hand in mine, and when I looked down, I could see my hand tightly secured in his. Ethan stood beside me, staring down at me with a stunned expression on his face.

I scanned the scene once more. There was a tall stone building in the distance—a castle maybe—and a dappled grey horse grazing quietly nearby under an idyllic tree. Beside the horse stood a young man, tall and straight, staring off into the distance: Ethan, only a younger version. He held the horse's reins and when the horse nudged his shoulder he smiled at the creature and stroked its nose. An older man stood beside Ethan, his long tan coat blown back, making him appear larger than his solid frame allowed. The two men stood, surveying the countryside, the older man gesturing to things off in the distance as they talked.

I looked up at Ethan (the one whose hand I was still holding) to make sure he was still there. He was—standing silently, taking in the scene in front of us, his expression incredulous.

"Where ... , *when* are we?" he asked. "How are you doing this?"

"Me?! I don't know. I'm not even sure I *am* doing this," I answered, shaking my head. I edged closer to Ethan until I could feel his arm against my shoulder. Ethan and I looked back toward the two figures. They didn't seem to have noticed us or heard us at all. We only stood, watching.

Ethan spoke quietly but loud enough that the other two people ought to have heard us. "That's my father and me. I *remember* this day ... ," Ethan's voice trailed off in disbelief, his brow creased. "Father!" he called. His father didn't respond—didn't even turn around. "Father!" Ethan called again, taking a step forward and letting go of my hand.

The instant Ethan let go of my hand, the book—time—began turning again—only forward this time. The pages layered back down on us, growing heavy and weighing me down. We arrived back in my apartment, standing beside the couch. I drew in a ragged breath and sort of dropped down onto the couch, tossed there by the spinning room.

How long has it been since I breathed?

I took another gulp of air, waiting for the world to stop swirling. Ethan sat down on the edge of the couch and took hold of my shoulders in a desperate grip. My hand still burned where Ethan had gripped it.

"Elly?" Ethan said, his tone one of desperation. I stared up at him. His brow was furrowed and alarm turned his eyes the blue of a late evening sky. He was talking, but I couldn't quite make out words.

"Hmmm?" I asked dully.

"What was that? How did you do that?"

I tried to pull my brain together and attempt a response. "I ... I don't know ... was that me?" I asked, trying to concentrate.

If he can't make sense of this he certainly can't expect me to.

"I've never experienced anything like that before. It isn't anything that I have ever heard of." Ethan gave me a sharp look. "I ... *remember* ... that afternoon," he said, appearing to have difficulty stringing his words together, his tone incredulous. "It wasn't terribly long ago. My father and I were out for a ride. It was just after my—a celebration," he amended. "That hill is

near my home. Why did you take me to that afternoon?" he asked suspiciously. I felt my heart speed up and it became difficult to draw a breath. I looked up at Ethan.

"I've never done anything like that before. I have no idea what just happened," I said plaintively. "What if it happens again? What if I can't come back?" Ethan's brows drew together.

"That's never happened before?" Ethan asked.

"No," I said, shaking my head emphatically. "And you don't know what that was?"

"No," Ethan said, frowning, "but we're going to have to be a lot more careful with your shifting. You're jumping into different frequencies with this thing now—no one should be moving around that much in time." Ethan's eyes darkened and he wore a disapproving expression. He shook his head, frowning. "You've obviously had enough for one day. I would feel better if you went to sleep. At least I know you won't be shifting while you sleep."

Hold on ...

"How do you know I don't?" I eyed him suspiciously.

Ethan cast me a sideways glance then stood up and offered me his hand again. "I've checked on you during my nights on duty. You were always where you ought to be." I looked at his hand then back up to his face. Ethan frowned and dropped his hand. I stood unsteadily for a moment, my head feeling light and the floor still rolling under my feet.

"Time for you to go to bed. You're exhausted and you aren't holding your frame steady. I'll be just outside the building. I won't be far if something should happen."

"You're staying outside all night? Where?" That didn't sound very comfortable. It sounded dark—and cold.

"We've done it often," Ethan said dismissively, "Liam and I usually just camp out by the trees. We stay at the upper end of the frequency and out of sight. Occasionally one of us will come in to check on you. Besides, I can hear you from there. You needn't be concerned. I'll make certain you're safe."

Arrgh ... he thinks I'm scared again.

"Just to be clear," I began with a hint of indignation, "I am more concerned with *your* comfort than I am with *my* safety. You really don't have to stay outside. You and Theo can stay in here if you need to stay close. Sleep on the couch if you like." I tried to inject some firmness into my tone, but given the yawn that interrupted my speech, I don't think it was very effective. At least Ethan nodded.

"Fine, but I won't be sleeping. I couldn't very well see danger coming if I were asleep, now could I?"

"You're going to stay up all night? What will you do? I think it would be better for you to get some sleep. You look tired too."

"I'll be fine. I'll sleep when Liam returns. Don't worry about me. I can usually find some way to pass the time." I could see a smile light his eyes although it didn't capture his mouth. He ushered me down the hall, stopping just outside my bedroom door. "You'll find me in the living room if you need me. Don't forget I'll be staying out of Jessica's line of sight."

"I still think you should get some sleep," I said.

"I'll be fine. Now go to bed," Ethan said with a hint of a smile.

I paused uncertainly. He seemed exhausted. He simply watched me, and I saw his eyes lighten a shade just before he frowned and turned suddenly.

"I'll see you in the morning," he called back, striding down the hall and into the living room.

I was still shifted up, so I could hear every move he made. I heard him sit on the sofa and sigh quietly.

He must be so tired.

I hurried through the washroom, brushing my teeth as quickly as I could. I changed into pyjamas and jumped into bed. I lay as quietly as possible, knowing Ethan was listening to my every move, just as I was listening to his. Would I be able to hear his heart if I were in the right frame? I lay very still, listening until I could hear my own heart. Then I heard his. It was slower than mine, but strong and even. It was a beautiful sound.

Wait.

If they could hear me even when they were outside Very quietly, I whispered, “Good night Ethan.”

I heard a faintly whispered, “Good night Elly. Shift down and sleep now.”

I smiled to myself when the sound brushed against my ear.

I was tired. Exhausted. I closed my eyes. The last thing I was aware of was the sound of Ethan’s heart beating in the next room.

Chapter 12: Superman

I never knew what woke me in the night. I suddenly found myself wide awake, staring into the darkness. I lay in my bed trying to figure out what time it was and what frame I might be in.

Like I would have a clue about that.

My body felt like it was encased in cement and I suspected I hadn't moved since I had fallen asleep. I tested my legs first, stretching them only to be met by an ache that ended in a mild cramp. I stopped stretching. Instead I lay, willing my sore muscles to loosen. It wasn't very helpful. I rolled over and looked at the clock: five o'clock.

I thought about turning over and trying to sleep again, but I was wide awake and I knew there was no going back. I threw off the covers and got out of bed, ignoring the loud protests of my calf muscles. I grabbed my bathrobe and flipped it on, moving at a judicious pace to prevent any more muscle spasms. I very quietly made my way to the bathroom, turning the light on only after I had shut the door behind me. I brushed my teeth and washed up—it appeared I was up for the day.

I finished in the washroom and headed down the hall, gingerly opening the door to Jess' room. I'd been so dead to the world last night I hadn't heard if Jess had come in after her shift. I felt a wave of relief when I saw her quiet form in her bed and heard her light snoring. I closed her door again and moved into the living room.

I stopped when I saw Ethan sprawled on the couch, sound asleep. I hesitated, watching him closely, but he didn't move. I cautiously went to stand beside him. Ethan's head was on the armrest. He had one arm and leg poured over the side of the couch as if he had fallen asleep sitting up and then fallen over. A book lay on the floor near his hand.

I told him he needed to sleep!

Ethan appeared decidedly uncomfortable, as though someone had tossed him in the general direction of the couch and he still lay where he had landed. I turned and hurried back to my room, grabbing the soft, blue throw I kept folded up on the end of my bed. I returned to the living room and set the blanket down on the coffee table. I slowly lifted Ethan's arm and leg onto the couch. He moaned softly, mumbled something unintelligible, and turned onto his side. I held my breath, only breathing again when he sighed deeply and re-settled.

I glanced at Ethan's feet, debating whether or not to take his boots off for him. I decided it was worth the risk. I carefully loosened them and slid them off. To my surprise, Ethan didn't even stir. I laid the blanket over him, being careful to pull it up around his shoulder. My eyes drifted to his face as I leaned over him. His usually stern features were softened by the serenity of sleep, a well-hidden vulnerability peering out from around the corners of his mouth.

I stood, watching him for several long moments, reluctant to leave such an engaging pastime. After a while, however, my legs objected, and I moved to sit in the chair off to the side of the room. I drew my knees up to my chest and pulled my bathrobe closer around me against the cool silence of the still, deep night. I sat watching Ethan sleep and listening to his slow rhythmic breathing. I stayed there, unmoving, for a long time. Thoughts of touching his cheek

or sliding my fingers through his thick, disheveled hair popped into my mind, unbidden. I pushed them away. Besides, I argued with myself, that might wake him up.

And he'd catch you running your fingers through his hair.

Yeah—that.

Coward.

Maybe. I contented myself with watching him from a safe distance.

After some time of sitting like a contortionist squeezed into a glass cube, my legs began to seize up and I was forced to untangle them. I cringed at the cold that greeted my feet when I pushed them out from under my bathrobe. I saw a thin beam of light fight its way through the blind as the sun reached up a finger to touch the early morning sky. I stood and crossed over to the couch, picking up the fallen book and returned to the chair.

I looked down at the book in my hands and almost laughed out loud: H. G. Wells' *The Time Machine*. I glanced over at Ethan. I hoped he knew when this was written and had some context for it. I shook my head. He must have gotten it off the bookshelf in my room during the night. I paused at that thought just before I flipped open the book and started to read, taking advantage of the determined beam of light.

It was seven o'clock when I heard Jess' bedroom door open. I watched as she stumbled groggily into the kitchen. I heard a tinny thunk and a clink as she set the kettle on the stove. She passed through the living room on her way back to the washroom and jerked to a stop when she saw me on the chair.

"Elly. You scared me. What are you doing up so early?" she asked around a yawn. I cast Ethan a surreptitious glance, then turned back to Jess.

"I was tired last night so I went to bed early. Guess I got enough sleep," I said, keeping my voice low.

"Did Ethan come back?" Jess asked. I nodded, trying to control the smile threatening to spread across my face.

"Yeah, he came back. He ... was here for a while."

And still is.

"Good, I'm glad you weren't alone. Is he meeting you today too?"

"I'm certain he'll be around." I couldn't help a small grin at my own joke.

"Better be," Jess mumbled as she turned and headed to the washroom. I listened for a moment then heard the rush of the shower.

Ethan stirred, and I turned to watch him. Much to my delight, I heard him murmur my name just before he sat bolt upright, swinging his feet to the floor at the same time. He glanced around frantically like a mother who has lost track of her toddler at the mall. He looked first to his boots on the floor and then to the blanket clinging precariously to his knees. It held there for several seconds then slowly sank into a puddle at his feet.

"Are you okay?" I asked quietly.

Ethan's gaze darted to where I sat curled up on the chair, still holding the open book.

"What happened? Are you all right?" he asked, reaching for the blanket and tossing it onto the couch. I wondered if Jess had seen the blanket on the couch.

What frame was it in anyway?

"Relax," I said. "You fell asleep. Everything is fine. Just be aware Jess is in the shower

and will be done soon.”

“I fell asleep?!” Ethan’s voice fairly rang with self-recrimination. I opened my mouth to remind him Jess was within ear-shot, but quickly realized she was in the shower and he was likely in another frame—either way, she wouldn’t hear him. I closed my mouth again, saying nothing.

Ethan muttered something harsh under his breath (I don’t think it was in English) as he hurried to pull on his shoes. He immediately cast me a quick glance. “Sorry,” he tossed at me with barely concealed vexation.

Is he apologizing for swearing or falling asleep?

Taking in his dark expression, I decided not to ask.

“Don’t worry about it,” I said lightly. “I had it covered. I would have woken you if anything had happened.” He measured me for a moment. “I *can* see into higher frames, you know,” I reminded him with some pique in my tone. “Really,” I continued superiorly, “I can keep watch better than you in some regards.” I tilted my chin up.

Ethan studied me silently for a moment or two.

“When did you wake up?” he asked, his tone calculating.

“Five o’clock.”

He thought for a moment then spoke, seemingly to himself. “Less than an hour then by your time. I know I saw four o’clock.” He groaned and placed his head in his hands. “I can’t believe I fell asleep.” He shook his head ruefully.

“How many nights have you been up?”

“I’m not certain. Fifteen maybe—human time.”

“What?! That’s insane!”

Oops.

Jess may not be able to hear Ethan, but she could certainly hear me well enough. I glanced toward the washroom, relieved to hear the shower still running. I lowered my voice, but my tone was harsh.

“You can’t do that! You have enough trouble in this frequency!” I hissed, jumping out of my chair and glaring down at him.

Is he crazy? Is he intent on killing himself?

“Quite the double standard you have!” I shot at him. “How *dare* you demand that I sleep while you neglect your own rest?” I clamped my mouth shut, pressing my lips together.

Ethan glanced at me but turned away again.

“Calm down, Elly,” he said in a somewhat placating manner as he closed his eyes momentarily and raked his hand through his hair. “It’s fine. We don’t sleep on the same schedule humans do. It’s not as bad as you think.” Regardless of his cavalier words, I could hear a hint of chagrin in his voice as well.

I should hope so.

“Maybe,” I said with some reservation, “but it was bad enough that you fell asleep.” He winced and I immediately regretted playing that card. “Sorry,” I said. He leaned over and tied his boots. “Promise me next time you’re tired you’ll let me keep watch or ask Theo to help.” He met my gaze reluctantly and heaved a sigh, pausing for a time to study my face before he spoke.

“Fine,” he said grudgingly.

“Thank you,” I said. I heard the shower turn off and glanced in the direction of the washroom. I set the book on the coffee table. “Help yourself to anything you need this morning,” I whispered to Ethan just before turning to head to the shower myself.

I turned to go, but Ethan stood and caught my wrist, turning me to face him. A jolt of energy shot up my arm and Ethan dropped his hand, flexing it.

“Elly wait. I feel terrible about being so careless. I’m sorry I fell asleep and I’m very sorry I wasn’t more responsible. I assure you it won’t happen again. I’ll do what I need to in order to keep both of us safe—even if I need to ask your help to do that. Please forgive me.” His eyes were a stormy blue, filled with remorse.

I checked the urge to place my hand against his cheek. I only smiled at him.

“There’s nothing to forgive. You just needed to rest. But you can’t do this alone. You’re not Superman, you know.”

Well, not quite anyway.

“Thank you,” he said, relief evident on his features. Relief, however, was quickly replaced with confusion. ““Super-man?”” he asked. I giggled quietly.

“I’ll explain later,” I whispered, hearing Jess opening the door of the washroom. Ethan glanced toward the sound and nodded.

“Mind your frame,” Ethan called from behind me as I turned to go. Right. Jess didn’t need to see me disappear—or *not* see it as the case may be. I was fairly certain there was a limit to how much freakishness she was prepared to accept. I just didn’t know where that limit might be. I headed to my bedroom to collect my clothes, still feeling the cool burn of Ethan’s hand on my arm.

I hurried through my morning routine, throwing on the first clothes I scraped up off my floor. I rushed into the kitchen to find Jess seated at the table eating toast and facebooking on her computer. She glanced up at me.

“Hey,” she objected, “isn’t that my T-shirt?”

“Maybe,” I said, shrugging. That earned me a scowl but she didn’t object any further, appearing to be more interested in her friend’s status update. Ethan walked into the kitchen but Jess didn’t look up. He went to lean against the wall, arms folded across his chest, and a lazy smile spreading across his face as he watched me. I looked down at my clothes: red long-sleeved t-shirt and jeans, pulled down and buttoned up—nope, nothing out of place. Ethan lowered his gaze and straightened his face, his eyes a mercurial sea of blue and green. He shrugged away from the wall and moved toward the door.

“I’ll be outside with Theo,” he said. “We’ll follow you to campus. Don’t worry if you don’t see us on the way. And make certain you have something to eat.” He reached the door and called back, “That colour suits you by the way.” I heard the quiet bump of the door and peered around the corner curiously. The door was closed and Ethan was gone.

I found Ethan and Theo waiting by the bike rack when we reached campus. Jess started to protest about me being left alone for the day but was quickly reassured when Ethan shifted down and “came to meet me”. Jess turned and left and I headed off to class.

“Where’s Theo?” I asked as Ethan and I walked across the Bowl.

“I’m not certain, but he’ll be close by. How are you feeling today? You appear more rested.”

“I slept all right, if that’s what you mean.”

“And what does it mean when you *don’t* sleep well? That information seemed important to

your sister when we spoke with her.”

“Generally it means something bad is about to happen.”

“Are you able to see ahead in time?” Ethan asked, casting me a curious look.

I shook my head.

“No—it’s just ... a hunch. At most you might call it a premonition, but I never can tell exactly what’s going to happen—just that something *is* going to happen.” I turned to Ethan then. “That’s not what happened last night is it? That thing with you in the field.”

“No,” Ethan said, his brow creasing. “That was the past. I remember that afternoon.”

“Where were we in the vision? Was that your home?”

Ethan cast me a wary glance before answering.

“Yes,” he said. “You caught a glimpse of my father and me on that particular day.” He continued to eye me speculatively.

“When you were younger,” I added.

“Yes, some time ago. I wonder ...,” he said, pausing to consider for a moment, “how could you see that?”

“*You’re asking me?* I have no idea,” I said, shaking my head. “I just sort of fell into it. Maybe it wasn’t even me.” I cast him a meaningful look. He shook his head.

“I’ve never experienced anything of the kind before. Are you certain nothing like that has ever happened to you before?”

“I’m pretty sure I’d remember something like that. No, that’s weird even for a freak like me.” For some reason that statement earned me a severe frown.

“Why do you do that?” Ethan asked sourly.

“Do what?”

“Call yourself a ‘freak’.”

“It’s the truth,” I shrugged, “I don’t fit in—I make people uncomfortable. No one has a clue what I’m on about most of the time, and frankly, I don’t understand them the other half of the time. It’s been that way ever since I was a kid.” I cast him a sober glance. “Children are not kind to those who are different. I *tried* to be like the other kids—especially in high school—but it didn’t make me any happier. I finally figured out that the best thing to do was to hang out with Jess and accept the fact that I’m a freak of nature. It’s easier than trying to pretend I’m normal when I’m not.”

Ethan stopped walking and turned to study me with a critical expression on his face.

“And do you think *less* of other humans for *not* being able to do the things you do?”

“No, of course not. They’re just wired differently than I am.”

“And you fail to see the double standard in that statement?” Ethan asked, aghast. I had no response to that question. I could only look at him, feeling a little off balance. He took my silence to be an answer. “You hold yourself to one standard and the rest of humanity to another. If you can accept them for doing what they were made to do, then why can you not accept the same thing in yourself? Why can you not allow that everyone is simply doing what he or she was created to do? You have extraordinary gifts. It’s true, they don’t fit with this time frequency, but they are gifts nonetheless—your gifts to use as you may. You shouldn’t feel badly about having them.” He turned then and continued walking toward the Chemistry building, shaking his head.

Huh. Maybe, but a moot point. Still don’t fit in.

We reached my class and Ethan stopped me outside the door. “I’m going to find somewhere to shift up,” he said, glancing around.

What? No phone booths handy?

I suppressed a grin and tried to listen to what Ethan was saying. “Theo and I will work together in the higher frequencies. After yesterday we’ll have to be more careful. Don’t worry, we’ll be close by.” I nodded. Ethan studied me for a moment, took a breath, then strode off around the corner of the building.

Oddly, despite the fact that half-human creatures were chasing me and everyone was waiting anxiously for Liam’s return, the day was pretty routine. Ethan and Theo shifted down during my lunch break and reported everything was (eerily) quiet. They looked around warily the entire time I ate my lunch, shifting back to a higher frame the second I was finished eating. I tried to tell them I could watch for chaeli, but they insisted that, by the time I saw the chaeli, it could be too late. I chafed at that, but I didn’t argue.

After a couple of classes that seemed to go on forever and an uncomfortable lab spent with Sean—it was both literally and figuratively twice as long as the classes—I gratefully went home. Ethan shifted down to walk me home. Having stayed in the upper frames all day, he had no vehicle to fold my bike into. We walked along together in silence, Ethan lost in thought as he wheeled my bike. I took in his brooding expression and decided silence would serve us best at the moment.

We continued on without speaking until I heard a catcall whistle from across the street. I instinctively turned toward the sound but quickly averted my eyes again when I saw it was only a couple of teenage boys. They were watching me and laughing, elbowing one another as they passed in the opposite direction on the other side of the street. I wondered at their impertinence—Ethan was in a human frame after all. I cast Ethan a self-conscious glance.

Ethan had stopped walking and was watching the boys, a hard glint in his steel blue eyes. Without taking his eyes off the two boys he asked, “Elly, could you take your bike for a moment please?”

On the surface his tone was polite and controlled, but I could hear a low undercurrent to it. I took my bike from him and before I understood what he was doing, he was halfway across the street.

I watched, stupefied, as he stopped the two boys and stood talking to them, hands on hips and towering over them. They looked at one another uncertainly then both turned nervously back to Ethan. Ethan spoke to them for a moment or two while the two boys ducked their heads with a quick shake. Ethan ushered them across the street heading in my direction.

What on earth is he doing?

The boys stopped in front of me, Ethan standing behind them, his arms folded across his chest as he glared down at them. One of the boys cast me a quick glance, his unruly brown hair drooping over one eye. He looked down and cleared his throat.

“Um, sorry about that. I ... we ... didn’t mean anything. We just Sorry,” he stammered.

I threw Ethan a questioning frown, but he only continued to glare at the two boys. I realized this was the point in the program where I was supposed to say something. I turned to Unruly Hair Boy.

“Thank you for the apology,” I responded. “It’s fine, really.” The boys simultaneously peered back over their shoulders at Ethan who nodded once. The boys took off as quickly as they could without actually breaking into a run. I turned to Ethan.

“Having a rough day?” I asked, one eyebrow raised. Ethan’s eyes darted to mine. He held

my gaze for the briefest of moments before he turned his attention to my bike. He took my bike from me, hoisted it onto his shoulder, and resumed walking. I hurried after him. “Really, was that necessary?” I asked.

“I told you: you’re my responsibility right now. I won’t allow you to be treated that way.”

“All they did was whistle,” I objected.

Ethan stopped and gaped at me.

“You accept that sort of behaviour here?” he asked, a hint of anger in his words.

I shrugged.

“I suppose it’s a little rude, but it happens all the time,” I said.

Ethan scowled, turned, and continued walking.

“It doesn’t happen where I come from,” he said tersely. “What they did wasn’t only rude it was predatory. Men with even a modicum of integrity would never force uninvited attentions on a lady.”

“Evidently, your world has different rules than mine.”

“So it would seem,” Ethan said, turning down one corner of his mouth. I glanced back over my shoulder at the retreating figures of the two boys. They were now some distance down the street.

“What did you say to them anyway?” I asked, half afraid to hear the answer.

“Something their fathers should have told them a long time ago.”

Given the dark expression on Ethan’s face, I didn’t press for details.

We arrived back at the apartment and I resigned myself to getting a couple of assignments done before my evening shift at work. I had put off doing them, but it turned out the work wasn’t as bad as it might have been thanks to Ethan. He was surprisingly helpful when it came to science and the assignments were done in short order. He explained that their culture was quite advanced in the sciences as they were able to combine their knowledge with human research. Evidently, in addition to leaping tall buildings in a single bound, Ethan could also navigate chemistry questions at lightening speed.

Bonus.

Ethan left me to finish up the final question while he and Theo ran a patrol. I completed the assignment and decided to press on with some reading. I heard the door open then close again as Jess stumbled in, tripping over the doorjamb. She dropped her keys on the kitchen table then set down her bag. I heard it roll off the table taking the keys with it and spilling all of its contents onto the floor.

How does she use time anyway?

“Hello,” Jess called. “I’m home.”

“Yeah—caught that. Do you need help?” I asked.

Jess appeared in the doorway of my room, tossing items back into her bag as it hung from her arm.

“No,” she said distractedly. “How was your day? You’re still in one piece I see.”

“Of course,” I said, rolling my eyes. “Ethan wouldn’t let me out of his sight for a minute.”

“Where is he now?”

“Not sure.” I wasn’t prepared to lie, but I chose my words carefully. “He left a little while ago. He said he would be back to take me to work later.”

“Liam’s not back yet?”

“No, he’s still gone. Trying to find something out.”

“Fine. Is Ethan bringing you home too or should I come get you?”

“I’m sure he’ll be giving me a ride home, but I’ll call if that doesn’t happen,” I assured her.

“Just don’t forget your phone,” Jess cautioned as she headed for her room, leaving me to continue with my reading. I wanted to shift up to catch up on a few chapters, but I was worried Jess would see me.

Or rather not see me as the case may be.

I sighed and resigned myself to working in human time. It was frustrating. It moved slowly and made me feel heavy and clumsy.

I wondered what it would be like in cian frequency—to actually *spend time* there.

Can you use that expression if you’re talking about living in the cian frequency?

I thought about my very brief sojourn there, trying to remember what details I could: the cool night air, the way the light reflected off objects, the clarity of the smells. If it proved to be anything like being shifted up here, I would likely rather enjoy it.

In a world filled with freaks would I seem normal?

I paused at that thought. I had absolutely no idea what ‘normal’ felt like. The notion was sobering and uncomfortable and I quickly went back to my other musings.

A wicked idea occurred to me then: what if I went to the cian frequency? Of course I knew Ethan would object, but I could go some time when he was on patrol—he need never know. I mentally listed the difficulties with my plan: I didn’t know exactly how to get there; I didn’t know how to get back; I didn’t know where I would end up if I did manage to get there (what if I shifted into the middle of their ocean, or like Ethan had said, off the side of a cliff?); also, I didn’t know my way around in that world—did they even speak English there? On top of all that, there was that pesky problem of dying if I went there—a fair certainty according to Liam. Pretty significant hurdles, one or two of which actually caused me some concern. My mind turned to Ethan then—specifically to his reaction if he were to catch me in his world. Exactly how upset would he be?

I heard the apartment door open and close softly, and I jumped guiltily. From where I sat, I could see Jess across the hall in her room, working at her desk. She didn’t look up—not at the sound of the door—not even when Ethan strode down the hallway and stopped at my door. He raised his hand to knock on the doorframe, but saw I was waiting for him to come in.

How had he gotten into the apartment?

“May I come in?” he asked, not moving.

Does he need to ask?

I tried to suppress a smile and nodded, realizing Jess would hear me if I answered him. I struggled to compose myself as Ethan walked in and sat down on the end of my bed behind me. I turned in my chair to face him. My stomach tightened a little as I recalled my mental musings about visiting cian time and I sat, desperately hoping he wouldn’t catch onto my errant thoughts.

Just how much can he pick up on anyway?

I felt my heart increase its pace and my breathing tighten. I tried to calm them, but Ethan was watching me and they only got worse. His expression turned to one of suspicion, his eyes narrowing.

“Elly ... exactly what are you thinking?” he asked warily. I couldn’t speak without Jess hearing me so I held up my hands, palms up and shrugged, grateful I couldn’t answer his question. “You appear ... guilty. What are you up to?” I silently gestured to the books on my desk, but I could feel my heart rate pick up again, this time at double speed.

Traitor!

“Right,” Ethan answered sarcastically. He walked over to my desk and shoved a pen and paper in front of me. “Start explaining,” he ordered.

So very busted.

My shoulders slumped in defeat and I sighed, reluctantly penning a quick response: **I was thinking about trying to get to your frequency.**

“What?! No! You’ll be doing nothing of the sort. Besides, you know I would never take you there. It’s far too dangerous.”

Bossy!

I fumed up at him for a second before I wrote: **I wasn’t planning to ask for your help.** I sat back in my chair, folding my arms across my stomach, but I couldn’t quite gather enough courage to look up at him.

“Are you insane?!” Ethan demanded, almost yelling. I winced and leaned away from him. He placed one hand on my desk and leaned over me. I cringed back in my chair. “You. Will. Not. Go. There.” Ethan ordered. “You would die. I can’t believe you would even *think* about doing that. *Why* would you even consider doing something so reckless?!”

I sighed, my anger at Ethan’s attitude swept away in an avalanche of self-pity. I had so many reasons: Ethan, me, my life, curiosity, tired of being an outcast, tired of moving frustratingly slowly, tired of no one understanding me—none of which were going to get me any closer to cian time. It was hopeless. I was stuck in human time. I wondered if Liam felt like this at times.

I had lots of reasons for wanting to go to cian time, but the one I gave Ethan—the one that summed up all other reasons—was: **Because I would fit in better there.** I frowned up at Ethan then looked away, sighing heavily.

Ethan stood silently for a moment, and when he didn’t speak, I looked back up at him. He shook his head, a pained expression on his face, then spoke quietly.

“This is why we don’t tell humans about us,” he said with remorse. “It’s never good.” He continued to study me with a sympathetic expression on his face before moving to my bed and sitting down on the end of it. He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. I turned toward him. “I’m sorry this is difficult for you Elly. I truly wish it wasn’t. But you can’t come to my time. Promise me you won’t ever try to sneak off to my frequency.”

I looked down, frowning. I didn’t want to make that promise but then, I didn’t exactly want to die either. I nodded reluctantly.

“Thank you,” Ethan said sincerely. We sat in silence for a moment before Ethan spoke again. “Shouldn’t you be getting ready for work?”

I glanced at my watch.

Shoot!

Only ten minutes to get ready. I jumped up and grabbed a change of clothes then hurried to

get ready in the bathroom. I raced to the kitchen, quickly threw some cold ham between two slices of bread and wolfed it down, chasing it with a glass of water. Ethan watched me rushing to get ready and stayed well out of my way.

“I’m out of here, Jess,” I called down the hall, grabbing my sweater on the way by.

“Ethan’s waiting for me.” Jess stuck her head out of her room.

“Okay, call if you need a ride home. I might be at the library. Call my cell if you need me. Don’t forget your phone!”

I checked my pocket: no phone.

“The counter,” Ethan said, pointing to where I had left it in the kitchen. I grabbed the phone and stuffed it in my pocket.

“Have it. Bye,” I said, hurrying out the door. It was a good thing Ethan was in a higher frame—he only just got through the door before I closed it.

My work shift finally ended, and we arrived back at the apartment.

“You’re tired,” Ethan observed. “You’ve had a busy day. You should go to bed.” He was right, of course.

I nodded as Ethan followed me down the hallway and into my room—outside of Jess’ sight of course. I went to my desk, and picking up a pen, wrote: **Help yourself to any of my books. Would you like me to take part of the night shift?**

That earned me a scowl.

“Thank you for the offer,” Ethan said tightly, “but that won’t be necessary.”

Yep, it still stung.

I narrowed my eyes and glowered at him. He caught my meaning and sighed heavily. “The sleep I had *last night*,” he said as he cringed, “will do me perfectly well until Liam returns. *However*, should I feel tired, I will wake you. Is that satisfactory?” I could hear the distaste in his voice as he spoke.

I inclined my head toward him and mouthed the words “thank you” then collected my things and went to the washroom to get ready for bed.

When I returned to my room, I found Ethan stretched out on my bed, a book in hand. He was holding the book open in front of his face and leaning back against the headboard, his ankles crossed and his feet hanging over the side of the bed. He had picked up my copy of *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee. He lowered the book when I entered the room, peering over the top of it.

“Ready for bed?” he asked. I nodded. He was up off the bed in one fluid movement that I couldn’t quite follow, and suddenly he was walking out door. “I’ll be in the living room if you need me.” He had to pass close by me as he made his way out of my room. His gait broke rhythm as he went by, but he didn’t stop. “Good night,” he said, not looking at me and continuing out of the room. I watched his retreating figure move down the hall until he turned into the living room. I heard him sit on the couch then all was quiet.

Sleep came quickly and left just as fast. I didn’t even have time to pour over every statement and movement Ethan had made that day. My head hit the pillow and I was out cold—briefly. After a few short hours of sleep (the clock read 2:38 AM when I woke) I felt that vague, disturbing dread prowling around in my head. I shoved it away and turned over, trying to reclaim my sleep.

I was just beginning to drift off to sleep again when the dread pounced—hard. It bolted from the dark, took a swipe at me with heavy claws, then made a hasty retreat back into the shadows. I was left breathless, my stomach tight and knotted. I searched through tangled thoughts and jumbled memories trying to track the dread as it circled, drawing ever closer as it waited to pounce again. My thoughts went first to the chaeli, but I felt no need to shrink away from them. Liam had gone to figure that out. We were waiting for him, weren't we?

Liam!

In half a heartbeat I had shifted and was racing down the hall. I moved so fast that Ethan was only halfway off the couch when I reached him. I grabbed Ethan's hand and tried to pull him toward the door.

"You have to help Liam. *Now!*" I said loudly, banking on being shifted up and out of Jess' hearing range.

"Elly, wait," Ethan said as he stood, unmoving, despite my best efforts to the contrary. "Tell me what's going on. What's wrong?"

"I don't know. I just know Liam is in danger. You have to go help him. *Hurry!*" I tried to push him toward the door, but he still didn't budge.

Oh, why won't he move?!

Ethan turned and gripped me by my arms, halting my feeble struggles. "Elly, tell me what's wrong," he said firmly, watching my face carefully.

"I can't sleep. I don't know exactly what's happening, but I know Liam is either in trouble or he's about to be. You have to go help him. *Please believe me.*" Ethan studied me for a moment.

"I don't know where Liam is," Ethan said, considering. "He wasn't entirely certain where he would wind up. It will take time to find him. I'll get Theo and have him stay with you."

"No! No time for that and you'll need help. Get Theo and have him help you find Liam. You have to go! *Now!* There's only a *chance* that I'll be in danger, but Liam is *definitely* in danger. *Right now.* Please help him," I pleaded. The dread was circling ever closer—I could practically feel its breath on my neck—and I was getting desperate.

"All right, all right. I'll see if we can find him. You *will* stay with Jessica as much as possible. You will *not* leave this apartment except for classes," Ethan ordered as I started pushing him out of the door.

"Yes, all right. *Go!*" I said, finally getting him to the door. Ethan frowned down at me as he allowed me to push him out the door. The instant he was in the hall, he shifted and entirely disappeared from sight. I blinked, several times, looking futilely down the gaping hallway.

And then he's just gone.

It crossed my mind to follow him, but I knew I would only slow him down. Besides, I had promised I wouldn't go to his frequency. I took a steadying breath, hugging myself against the sudden chill I felt. I stepped back into the apartment and quietly closed the door, turning the deadbolt with a firm hit of metal on metal. The sound echoed in my head as I realized a small thing like a deadbolt would be no deterrent to a chaeli intent on killing me. Might as well leave the door wide open—but I didn't. I shook my head and walked slowly back to my room knowing it was going to be a long night.

And it was.

Chapter 13: Developments

I slept intermittently, the fear and dread stalking me in my sleep. I thought about Liam, but now I worried about Ethan and Theo too. I finally fell into a restless sleep toward early morning. When my alarm went off—only two and a half hours later—I woke reluctantly, feeling groggy and dull, a diffuse headache already starting to seep up the back of my head. It took me a few moments to remember what day it was, and what I was supposed to be doing: Friday. I groaned. This was going to be a very long day. It was a good thing I didn't know at the time just how long the day would turn out to be. If I had, I might have rolled over and hidden under my covers.

I could hear Jess in the shower which meant I had a few more minutes in bed until it was my turn in the washroom. I had almost fallen asleep again when Jess stuck her head in my room.

“Are you getting up?” she asked.

I mumbled an unintelligible response and threw off the covers. They seemed heavier than usual. I stumbled through my morning routine, bleary-eyed and clumsy and once again wishing I drank coffee. When I got to the kitchen after a quick shower, I was a little more awake, although hardly feeling better. Jess looked up from her phone.

“Rough night?” she asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Yeah,” I yawned.

“Now what?” she asked, sitting up straighter. Her phone beeped but she ignored it.

“I think it has something to do with Liam,” I said. “I asked Ethan to go check on him.”

“So they're *both* gone?” Jess asked. “You'll be alone today?”

“I guess.” I made a face at that realization. “I'll be fine Jess. I'll be careful.”

“You will *absolutely* be careful. I'll walk you to your first class,” she stated matter-of-factly. “I think you should check in with me at noon too. Where's your last class before lunch?”

“So not necessary, Jess,” I said, rolling my eyes. As if Jess could do anything about invisible chaeli with swords. Jess only folded her arms and looked at me, giving an admirable impression of the legendary sword in the stone. There was only one way this was moving forward: her way. I heaved a sigh. “English class. Arts building,” I said resignedly.

“Fine. I have physics. How long are your friends going to be gone?”

“I have no idea.”

Forever maybe.

Jess stood waiting.

“Why don't I meet you outside of your physics class?” I offered.

“Sure,” she agreed.

We collected our things and ventured out into the bare light. It was raining again—one of those cold, misty types of rain that seems to insidiously penetrate every article of clothing you have on no matter how much you cover up. Jess and I took the bus to school, riding in the damp gloom that saturated the bus and the people inside it. The passengers sat silently staring out the windows or at the floor of the bus.

When we reached campus, Jess and I poured out of the sauna of a bus. We escaped the

stream of passengers and walked to my chemistry class. After a brief glance around, Jess left for her first class, and I endured a morning of unrelenting paranoia, checking over my shoulder often and wondering if some chaeli was going to jump out at me at any moment. Was this how the guys felt all the time?

Not so much fun.

From among my dragging musings, the thought did occur to me that I didn't have anything with which to defend myself against swords.

What? Left yours at home?

There wasn't much I could do about that. In any case, I wasn't sure I would be able to wield anything larger than a penknife—I was just too tired. Thanks to my disrupted night, my eyes were heavy, and my head ached. My arms hung heavily at my sides, and I felt dull and slow. Maybe I should have stayed home today.

The day moved forward pulling me along with it, sort of like a drifting raft bumping down the sandy riverbank along with the river's current. Each of my classes ended in turn despite my difficulty following the lectures. I'd have to re-visit the material later. I left my English class and headed to meet Jess, finding a reasonably comfortable bench in the main lobby of the Physics building. I dropped my heavy backpack down onto the bench then let myself fall down beside it. I opened my bag and pulled out one of my texts, intent on getting some reading done while I waited. The next thing I knew, Jess' voice was echoing in my ears.

"Hey. Elly. Wake up."

I started into a sitting position, peeling my face off my backpack, and taking a full two seconds to realize what had happened.

So much for being careful.

Now I knew how Ethan had felt. "Sorry," I mumbled, my mouth feeling fuzzy. I tried to swallow. "I guess I was more tired than I thought."

"I'd say. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," I assured her just as a sudden realization hit me. "Wait! I *slept*."

"So . . . , everything's all right then?" Jess asked.

"Maybe," I shrugged. I wasn't sure, but I looked hopefully at Jess. "Maybe they'll be back soon."

"I hope so," Jess said decisively. "What else do you have today?"

"Um, Biochem. Right after lunch. Then I'm finished for the day." I was grateful I had no labs this afternoon. I could barely follow the lectures. I wouldn't have stood a chance at any assignments.

"I have one more class than you do today," Jess said considering me for a moment. "I think you should wait for me, and we can go home together." I frowned. That would mean waiting an extra hour.

"I guess I can wait for you. Where will you be?"

"I'm over in the Arts building, second floor. Math. I'm done at two thirty."

"Okay. Why don't we meet by the bike rack after your class?" I suggested.

"That'll work."

My final class for the day somehow managed to pass although it dragged so badly I checked to see if I had accidentally shifted up. I almost fell asleep once or twice. I felt like a zombie

walking through my day, dull and disinterested, unable to think. When class finally ended, I walked out of the building and into the brisk fall air.

It had stopped raining, but it was still cloudy with a palpable veil of moisture hanging just shy of actual rain so it dampened my face and chilled me to the core. I took a deep breath of the crisp air, its coolness cutting through my mental fog and dulling the headache still residing at the back of my head.

Enough is enough.

I would have to find a cup of hot chocolate or a Coke or *something* to keep me awake. I went to a coffee shop in one of the nearby buildings and bought a mocha—a good compromise with enough sugar to hide the coffee taste. I sat warming my hands on the hot cup and waiting for Jess to be finished for the day. Finally, the hour had almost passed, and I began to make my way to the bike rack. The mocha had made me somewhat more alert, but now I just felt like an awake zombie. I picked up my things and headed outside.

As I cut behind the neighboring building, I heard a scuffling sound behind me. Suddenly I was wide awake. I knew no one had been behind me when I had started walking. In my paranoia of the day I had checked—twice. Paranoia does have its place after all.

Listen!

I could hear low, harsh murmurings and hushed footsteps behind me. Feet brushed through the carpet of leaves, sounding like someone wading through ice slush. My first impulse was to shift up—to get away from whatever it was—but I checked that urge. My ability to shift was my only advantage at the moment, and I wasn't about to play that card without a plan to carry me through. First, I needed to know what I was dealing with.

I sucked back the panic that was sending my heart careening around in my chest and forced myself to walk slowly to a nearby bench. I calmly sat down, making a pretense of digging through my bag as I looked around. I immediately spotted two creatures scuffling along the path I had been on—headed right toward me. They were almost human, but not quite. They plodded forward, hunched over and glancing around furtively, scowls fixed on both of their faces. I drew in a sharp breath.

The first time I had seen them (that evening in the Bowl) I assumed the creatures' hideous appearance was, at least in some part, due to the darkness of the evening and to my own fear. But now, with the revealing light of day focused on every bone and crease, I realized these things were genuinely ugly, like decomposing jack-o-lanterns left on front lawns too long after Halloween.

Their faces seemed to collapse in on themselves, pulling their eyes and cheeks into their head while the bones were left, draped in thin, grey skin that hung loosely down. Their yellowed eyes lit up the recesses of the deep sockets, seeming to burn with an eerie light, and I wondered if their sparse, grey hair might catch fire if it fell against them. I swallowed hard against the sickening fear rising up in my stomach.

Despite my best efforts to stave off panic, my breath caught and my muscles seemed stuck in place—or maybe time. From somewhere in the recesses of my mind I remembered some television talk-show about self defense. Some nameless instructor wearing track pants had asserted people always froze when they faced some kind of threat and the best way to unfreeze was to breathe. I sucked in a draught of air. I felt my muscles loosen somewhat so I pulled in another breath. I guess Track Pants was right—I thawed. I tried to think then—tried to decide what to do, but I came up blank. Not one single thought surfaced. Sure, I was calm, but I had no

idea what to do next. Track Pants hadn't mentioned that part.

Think!

Okay, okay. Creatures like that couldn't just walk around campus in broad daylight. They must be in a higher frame where people can't see them. But how did that help me? I supposed they wouldn't know I could see them from the frame I was in. And, if they didn't know that, they likely didn't know the extent of my shifting. Maybe. Hopefully.

The creatures were moving more quickly now and coming on fast. They were watching me more than they were looking around, and I could almost feel the heat of their eyes burning into my skin. A smell like decaying food drifted toward me on the cool breeze and I made a face. I stood and started walking away from the chaeli. There was no need to check if they were following me—of course they were. Besides, like feeling the heat of Ethan's scrutiny in class, I could feel the dark, cold energy of the two creatures behind me—sort of like reverse heat vision. The creatures drew closer as I walked.

Not much time!

It did occur to me to run, but where would I run to? They would only follow. Maybe I could lose them. I abruptly turned around the corner of the building, coming up along the east side of it. That plan mostly worked—only one of them followed me around the side of the building, but now I didn't know where the other one had gone. Not so good.

What kind of plan is this anyway?

I'm improvising! Fear drove me forward perhaps a little too quickly as I tried to put some distance between the chaeli and myself. I was careful not to shift—at least I hoped I hadn't. I was nearing the front of the building, one chaeli trailing a short way behind me, when I caught sight of Jess standing by the bike rack. She saw me and waved.

Darn it!

I stopped in my tracks, watching Jess and feeling the cold burning of the chaeli behind me. In that moment, looking over at Jess, I was suddenly tackled head-on by the despair of resignation. Sometimes, however, resignation can tackle fear too—and this was one of those times. After all, when there's nothing left to lose, all sorts of options open up. In a split second, resignation turned panic to determination and quieted the frantic beat of my heart into a smooth, even rhythm.

Dropping my backpack onto the grass, I turned around to face the chaeli following me, staring directly at it as it continued lumbering toward me. I forced myself to stand, enduring that terrible moment when its beady eyes met mine. My stomach turned, and I made a face, but I didn't look away. The chaeli stopped suddenly when our gazes locked, his mouth dropping open to reveal the browning remnants of broken teeth. There was the briefest flash of fear in his yellowed eyes. The fear dissolved into uncertainty and the uncertainty gave way to a knowing gleam. The thing sneered at me.

I took a step back, but stopped just short of turning and running. I stood my ground and forced myself to breathe again. My eyes still locked with those of Beady Eyes, I heard the scraping of metal on wood, but it was only when a glint of light stabbed at my eye that I saw the sword in Beady's hand. Beady slowly raised his blade, pointing it at me as he strode purposefully forward. I heard Jess call my name, but didn't turn around—I only prayed she would stay where she was.

I took another step back, coming to the front corner of the building. I half turned, intending to run across the front of the building and lead the chaeli away from Jess. I had taken exactly one step in that direction when I looked up to see the second chaeli coming around the far side of the building.

Great. That's where it went.

I had just helped trap myself between Jess and two chaeli.

Okay. New plan.

I could see the chaeli lumbering quickly along the front of the building. It moved with the smooth limp of an injury that had long since healed. My head bounced back and forth between the two chaeli as if I were watching a ping pong game. A malevolent smile split Beady's face as he held his blade high and started running toward me along the side of the building.

Think!

Wait! Chemistry 101: like dissolves like—two chemicals of similar nature will dissolve one another. All at once the pieces fell into place for me, but I would have to time this perfectly.

I glanced back at Jess. She stood by the bike rack watching me with a bewildered expression. I allowed myself the luxury of a moment's relief before turning back to Beady. I peered around the front of the building to see Limpy still moving toward me from that direction too. I forced myself forward exactly one step along the side of the building toward Beady and (I hoped) out of Limpy's line of sight in the front.

I stood, watching Beady lower his sword, aiming it at my chest as he rushed toward me. My heart started to pound faster and I could feel the thump of the creature's heavy feet strike the ground, the rhythm jarring my body and stealing air from my lungs. I didn't move. Beady was so close now I could almost feel the cold bouncing off his blade. My breathing came quick and shallow, my heart lurching into a gallop. This time I didn't try to slow it.

Now!

Just as Beady reached me—his foul stench in my nose and his blade only centimeters from my chest—I shifted and pushed up off the ground—hard. I launched myself up over Beady just as Limpy rounded the corner and rushed to drive his blade into my back. I instantly knew I had overdone the force of my leap. I panicked and forgot to slow my fall. I landed off-balance and fell into a roll, the wet grass swiping my cheek and arm. An angry snarl pierced my tumbling thoughts, sending their fragments scattering.

I pushed myself to my feet, turning as I stood. Limpy lay on the ground on his side, a sword blade through his midsection and protruding out his back. I turned away, only to meet the acrimonious glare of Beady as he looked up from his fallen partner.

It only took a fraction of a second for Beady to recover his senses. He turned, placed a booted foot on Limpy and pulled the sword out of Limpy's belly. Beady immediately rounded on me, his sword raised high.

I looked around frantically, spotting Limpy's sword by his still hand. I glanced between the quickly approaching Beady and the sword on the ground.

No time!

Beady rushed at me taking a wide swing with his sword. I ducked and rolled under the blade, coming up next to Limpy's fallen sword. I don't know how it happened, but when I

righted myself the sword was in my hand. I spun to face Beady. He skidded to a halt and swung around. Our eyes locked.

I held the sword up, trying to keep it steady despite my shaking hands. It was heavy—heavier than I had thought it would be. I didn't know how long I could hold it up, and I certainly didn't know how I was supposed to swing it—the thing was as likely to go flying out of my hands as it was to hit any mark. My heart thudded loudly in my ears as I watched Beady approach with a menacing snarl.

I shifted a little, and the sword grew lighter in my hands. I held my frame for a short time, but lost it again as I fought to keep my panic in check. The chaeli held his sword high to one side of his head, pointing the blade down at me.

Looks like he knows what he's doing.

I heard a muffled noise behind me but didn't turn, keeping my attention on Beady. Just how hard does a person have to swing a sword in order to do any sort of damage to their opponent? I was still trying to figure out the answer to that question when someone grabbed my waist in a firm grip. The brown, cloying smell of something long dead wrapped around me and my lungs seized, refusing to draw in the foul air. Panic—or maybe the lack of oxygen—made my heart beat fast. I lost my focus and my frame. I heard a low growl close to my ear and cringed away from the sound, but the iron grip held fast. Beady smiled broadly and walked toward me with deliberate caution.

I squirmed and wrestled, trying to push away from the arm holding me while I tried to lift the sword in my hands. I took a futile swing through thin air. My feeble attempts only elicited a hacking laugh from the chaeli holding me as he lifted me off the ground, crushing my ribs in the process. I couldn't breathe. Beady resolutely raised his sword high. I closed my eyes and turned my face away, not wanting to see the stroke as it fell.

At that moment I heard the sickening crunch of bone and the nauseating wet ripping sound of tearing flesh. I felt myself fall back onto my feet, off-balance. I was immediately caught around my waist again then jostled back a step as a body slammed into the front of me.

I glanced around frantically, trying to figure out what was happening. Ethan now stood between Beady and me. Ethan's left arm was held high, straining against the chaeli's sword as it cut into Ethan's forearm, blood running down the edge of the blade. Ethan's other fist was jammed into Beady's stomach. Beady fell back, and I was lifted off my feet and pulled back several paces.

When I was set on my feet again, I turned to find Liam still holding me loosely around my waist with one arm. I looked back at the two chaeli—only there were three now. Limpy still lay where I had watched him fall. Ethan was standing over Beady. Ethan pulled a knife from the chaeli's stomach. I watched, horrified, as Ethan drew out a sword from its sheath on his belt and raised it high above the chaeli lying at his feet. A short way from them, Theo was approaching a third chaeli, Theo's sword aimed at the thing as it pulled itself along the ground, edging away.

I felt my arm gripped tightly and looked down at my imprisoned wrist then up to Liam's stern face.

“Why don't you let us handle things from here?” he asked, a sardonic smile twisting up one corner of his mouth. There was an edge to his voice and a sharp glint in his stone grey eyes. He held my wrist firmly with one hand and pried my fingers from the hilt of the sword with the other. When he had wrestled the sword from my hand, Liam pulled me behind him and stood watching the others.

Ethan and Theo both held swords high as they each approached the fallen creatures before

each of them. It took me a moment to understand what was happening. Ethan and Theo lifted their swords simultaneously and brought the blades down hard on the chaeli's necks, severing their heads from their bodies. I gasped, my stomach rolling over a wave of nausea. Liam glanced at me and pushed me further behind him.

I craned my head around Liam's uncompromising form to see Ethan dispatch the third chaeli. Ethan and Theo picked up the chaeli's swords and tossed them down on top of the bodies. Liam tossed the sword he held toward one of the bodies too. I watched then as the chaeli and their clothes began to turn to dust.

I stared, transfixed by the scene in front of me. The clothes and skin sank into the bones, then the bones crumbled into a light, dusty powder that swirled away on the breeze. The swords remained for a moment then disappeared altogether.

I gripped a handful of Liam's shirt and stood with my mouth hanging open as I watched the scene unfold. I didn't know if I was breathing, but I could hear my pulse hammering in my ears. Liam turned toward me, standing in front of me and obscuring my view. I leaned around him, trying to see.

I was only vaguely aware of Ethan and Theo coming toward us. Liam placed his hand on my shoulder turning me away from the image. I cranked my head over my shoulder and continued to watch. Liam put both hands on my shoulders and turned my body from the scene, pushing me further away from the area. When the last traces of chaeli had vanished I slowly turned to stare up at Liam. I felt a little cold and shaky, and whatever Liam saw on my face made him turn down one corner of his mouth. My knees felt as though they might give way at any second, as though I had just run a marathon.

"Are you hurt?" Liam asked, his voice rough, reflecting the dark shade of his eyes. I could only shake my head. "I'm sorry you had to see that," he said. Ethan and Theo came to stand on either side of us.

"I ... what ... ?" I stammered. After what I had just seen, all coherent thought had left me. I glanced back to where dark patches discoloured the grass like small grassfires that had been snuffed out. I swallowed hard against the nausea that rose up in my throat and drew in a couple of breaths. I finally found enough of a voice to ask, "Was that really necessary?"

"Yes. It's the only way to kill them. If you don't kill them they heal fast and come at you again," Liam explained soberly.

"Why did they ... *decompose* like that?" I asked, making a face at the image.

"They're humans who were living out of sync with their time for many years. They should have been dead a long time ago. All that time caught up to them at once," Liam said with a quick glance back at the tarry patches. I followed his gaze. For some reason, my knees chose that moment to start shaking like jell-o. Liam gently pulled me to a nearby bench as he peered over to where Jess stood.

Jess was just beginning to move toward the area where the chaeli had fallen. I wondered why she was taking so long to come find me but then realized that in Jess's time frame, all of this would have happened in only a few seconds. She had likely just registered my seeming disappearance.

"I think you should sit down. You look a little pale," Liam said.

I turned to him.

Do I?

"No. I'm fine," I answered mechanically as I sat heavily on the bench. My voice sounded far off to my ears. I sat, staring at nothing in particular, trying to breathe. I watched as Liam

moved over to Ethan.

“Let me see that,” Liam said, gesturing to Ethan’s arm.

Ethan frowned and raised his arm, blood running down from the nasty-looking gash across it and dripping off his elbow. My breath caught.

“Are you all right?” I asked urgently. Ethan only cast me a sideways glance then turned his attention back to his arm. I watched as Liam lifted the hem of his shirt, tore off a strip along the bottom, and wrapped the material around Ethan’s arm. He tore the last bit of the strip down the middle lengthwise and tied it securely. Ethan examined the binding, flexed his hand twice then nodded at Liam. They both turned back to me.

Ethan stood, the hand of his undamaged arm on a hip, his bandaged arm hanging by his side. He fixed a disapproving frown on me. Theo and Liam appeared equally unimpressed as they stared down at me. I lifted my eyes to Ethan’s, my stomach tightening at what I saw there. It seemed as though he might finish the job the chaeli had started. I shrank back. He turned away. When he looked back at me again his expression had softened into mere terseness.

Liam spoke first. I couldn’t tell if it was anger or worry in his tone—maybe a little of both. “How ... why ... ,” he stammered. His lips pressed into a line as he turned away.

Ethan picked up where Liam left off.

“What on earth were you thinking, taking on three chaeli?” Ethan asked tightly.

Hey!

“Do you think I sought them out for a bit of sport? I was thinking about how best to keep them from killing me,” I answered with no small amount of pique. Our eyes locked and I forced myself to meet his midnight blue gaze steadily.

Give no ground.

“And exactly what made you think you could manage this on your own?” Ethan asked angrily.

I drew myself up.

“I think I was doing pretty well, thank you very much. In case you hadn’t noticed, I had already taken out one of them.”

“No you hadn’t,” Theo argued. “That one would have been up again in seconds. The one in front of you was just stalling until the third one grabbed you or the other one got up.”

“I didn’t know there *was* a third one,” I said. “Besides, how was I supposed to know they get back up after you kill them?” I asked caustically.

“Exactly the point!” Theo protested. “There’s a lot you don’t know about this stuff.”

“What should I have done?” I asked heatedly. “Wait for the three of you while they came at me with swords?”

Theo opened his mouth to say something, but Ethan raised his hand, silencing him. Ethan clenched his jaw just before speaking.

“Theo’s right,” Ethan said in a tightly controlled tone. “There are things you don’t know and many things you can’t do. You will die if you engage these creatures on your own and if you die all of the risks we’ve taken and all of the work we’ve done to keep you alive will have been for nothing. Next time you see chaeli you will run. You’ll get a head start before they realize you can shift.” He stopped and studied me for a moment, his features as stern as though they had been carved from granite.

“But ... ,” I began to protest.

“Ellyanna!” Ethan said through grit teeth. “Your reckless behaviour is going to get us all

killed. Please let us do our job.”

Hearing my full name brought me up short. Suddenly I was four again and my mother was glaring down at me for something I had done—and shouldn’t have. Ethan’s bandaged arm caught my unwilling attention. Blood was slowly seeping to the surface of the makeshift dressing, crawling along the threads of the linen in a Minecraft pattern of bright red blood. I sunk back into the bench, turning away guiltily.

“Fine,” I said petulantly, refusing to look up.

“Elly ... ,” Ethan began in a cautionary tone.

“Yes, I know,” I replied tersely, looking up at him then. “Run next time. I got it.” An awkward silence followed, and I glanced at Ethan’s bandage again. I winced. “Sorry,” I said heavily. “Thank you for your help,” I added quietly, surveying the three faces watching me.

“You’re welcome,” Ethan said sincerely.

I heard Jess call my name. She was half way between the bike rack and the battle scene, searching anxiously for me.

“I have to go meet Jess,” I said, “but first tell me what happened last night.” I turned to Liam. “Are all of you okay? Were you in danger? Did Ethan reach you in time?”

“Ethan told me you sent him to help me. Thank you,” Liam said with a pained expression on his face.

“What happened?”

“I was in a bit of a tight spot. I was caught by some of the chaeli—one was a high-ranking officer. It was tense for a while. When Ethan and Theo showed up, the chaeli decided they didn’t like the odds. We were able to walk away without a fight.” I didn’t miss the way Ethan was carefully watching Liam as he spoke.

Hmmm ...

I turned to Ethan. “And?” I asked, watching Ethan steadily. I watched as guilty surprise registered on his face. It was quickly replaced with a calculating look.

“It’s just as Liam said. We left without a fight.”

“Uh huh ... ,” I said skeptically, “and what did you find out?” I asked, turning to Liam for an answer.

“Not a lot. We know that Corbett and Delano—the two leaders of the chaeli—are determined to get at you, but not even their top soldiers know why.” Ethan and Liam exchanged another glance.

“There’s something you’re not telling me,” I said, looking between the two of them.

“Delano and Corbett are involving themselves personally with your case,” Ethan said with a heavy sigh. “That’s unusual. They never come into the field. The two of them are more ... formidable than the others they’ve sent so far. That’s a definite concern. We think they will be here shortly.”

At that, the dread pounced, pinning my thoughts.

“That’s what we’re waiting for,” I breathed, turning my hollow gaze on Ethan, peering through him to the coming of the two leaders. I could see them marching toward me, swords raised. My head swam and an inexplicable pain gripped my chest. It was difficult to breathe, and I wrapped my arm across my ribs, trying to ease the tightness in them.

This is going to be bad.

I sat, hugging myself and shaking my head as the dread sucked me under an all-encompassing black tidal wave.

“What’s wrong?” Ethan asked in alarm.

I only shook my head, the dread clawing at any thought I may have had.

“Give me a moment, please,” I begged. Ethan and Liam exchanged grave looks as I struggled to pull the pieces of the puzzle together. A piece—or maybe a lot of them—was missing. I tried to sit up—tried to breathe. “Why did they let you go? Why aren’t they already here?” I asked, searching for the missing pieces.

Ethan and Liam exchanged another glance, and Theo turned away guiltily. No one said anything, and I continued to look from face to face.

“That’s not really important,” Ethan finally said. “Elly, we have to get you out of here. We need to hide you somewhere until we can make a plan. Liam knows a place we can go. You’ll need to let Jessica know you’re leaving.”

Jess.

I straightened up, working to draw in a decent breath. I turned to watch Jess as she very slowly walked toward the place where I had shifted out of sight. I jumped up.

“We have to get Jess,” I said urgently. “I’m supposed to meet her and I think she saw me shift.” The tightness in my chest eased but didn’t leave entirely, the dread still circling, waiting for another chance to pull me under. For now, however, I could breathe. We watched as Jess walked past us, moving to the area where the last of the chaeli dust settled into the dirt as the first drops of rain began.

“She saw you?” Ethan asked as his expression turned to consternation. He glanced over to Jess and then back at me.

I nodded.

“I think so. She was coming to meet me, but I had to deal with the chaeli just then.”

“How are we going to explain that one?” Theo asked as he studied Jess, who now stood surveying the battle area, likely wondering where I had gone. Theo exchanged a quick glance with Ethan.

“I think we should find out what she saw first,” I suggested. Ethan nodded and led us around to the back of the building.

“Liam, Theo,” Ethan said, “would both of you walk with Elly to meet Jessica? I’ll get the car. I’ll pick all of you up in front of the Arts building.” He looked down at me. “Don’t tell her anything until I’m back.”

Liam and Theo both nodded, and after one last glance around to ensure no eyes were watching, the three of us shifted down to a normal human frame. Liam placed one hand under my elbow and led me back toward Jess as Ethan hurried off in the opposite direction.

We walked over to where Jess was leaning down to pick up my fallen backpack. She immediately caught sight of us and I saw relief flood her face.

“There you are,” she said a little breathlessly. Her expression turned cross then. “Elly what happened? I saw you turn toward the back of the building and then you just ... disappeared!” she said, the disbelief obvious in her tone.

Great—she saw that.

One corner of my mouth turned down. Jess held out my backpack to me. Liam took it and threw it over his shoulder before I could even reach for it. Jess glanced at him, then at Theo, but ultimately pinned me with an expectant arch of one eyebrow.

“I know, Jess. I can explain, but first we need to get home. Ethan and Liam are back and there’s something we need to deal with.” I paused then, remembering something. “Jess, this is

Ethan's brother, Theo." Theo nodded to her but said nothing. Jess looked at Theo, lifted her chin in acknowledgement and turned back to me.

"Elly, what's going on?" she asked tightly.

"We can't talk about this here," Theo interrupted. "Ethan is bringing the car. We need to go." He scanned the area warily.

Jess frowned at me but nodded. Liam gestured toward the path. We hurried toward the Arts building with Liam leading and Theo close behind us. We walked around to where Ethan stood waiting by his car—yet another one I didn't recognize. This one was low and black with darkly tinted windows.

"Hello Jessica," Ethan said politely, nodding at her.

"Hey Ethan. I'm glad you're back, but I think you have some explaining to do," Jess responded, leveling a *take no prisoners* warning look at him.

I cringed.

Ethan just nodded, his expression sober. He opened the back door for Jess and me to slide in. Theo climbed into the back seat beside me, pulling the door shut. Ethan and Liam took one last look around before dropping into the front seats of the sleek car and we drove away.

Chapter 14: The Drive

The five of us made our way up to the apartment. The instant Ethan closed the door he turned to me. “Elly,” I would like you to pack a bag with whatever clothes you will need for several days, perhaps up to a week. Think cooler weather, and pack warm clothing. We need to leave immediately.”

Jess’ jaw dropped.

“Hold on just one minute,” she protested, putting her hands on her hips and moving to block my path to my room. She turned to Ethan. “None of you are going anywhere until I have some answers and maybe not even then,” she demanded. She turned to me. “First of all, what happened in the Bowl? Elly, you *disappeared!*” To anyone else listening, Jess likely sounded angry, but I could hear a familiar timbre in her voice—a specific combination of high frequency and decibel level—that I’d heard many times before. Jess may indeed have been angry, but it was only because she was on the verge of panic.

“Yeah, I know, Jess. Calm down,” I said, watching Jess’ cheeks turn a brighter pink. My brain was working over-time trying to figure out what I was about to say next. I turned to Ethan, but he wasn’t any help. He only stood, looking at me like he was watching me pull a card from the middle of his carefully constructed house of cards. I turned back to Jess.

I can’t lie to her.

I frowned then pressed forward decisively. “You just sort of lost track of me, Jess. I was moving *really* fast.”

“C’mon Elly, no one can move that fast,” Jess said with a shake of her head. “Not even you.”

“Actually ...,” I glanced behind me at Ethan, Liam, and Theo then back to Jess. “We all can. They sort of taught me.”

Jess rolled her eyes.

“Elly ...,” she began in a patronizing tone, just before I cut her off.

“Jess, you’ve always been there for me, and I might have kept some things from you, but I’ve never lied to you. I’m not making this up.”

Jess frowned at me, her dark eyes boring into me.

“Elly, do you really expect me to believe the four of you can just disappear at will?” she asked incredulously. I realized we might be going round and round this thing all night at this rate. I pressed my lips together, shifted up and moved to stand behind Jess. I shifted down again.

“Yes, Jess, I do,” I said firmly. Jess whirled around at the sound of my voice. She turned a sickening shade of grey when she saw me standing behind her. She took a couple of steps back but stopped, glancing warily back over her shoulder at the three men behind her. She took one step closer to me again, her breathing shallow and quick.

“What’s going on?” she asked, her voice barely audible. I could hear her jagged heart beat.

“Elly,” Ethan said quietly, “there isn’t time to explain. We need to go quickly.”

I nodded and turned to a rather shaken Jess.

“I’m sorry, Jess, I have to go. I can’t explain things right now.”

At that, Jess drew in a sharp breath. Her eyes brightened and some colour returned to her face.

“What do you mean? You’re not going anywhere with these freaks,” she commanded.

“Jess!” I snapped, casting an apologetic look toward the three men as they stood by the door. I turned a disapproving frown on Jess.

“I’m just sayin’ . . . ,” Jess said, putting up her hands as if in surrender.

“Okay, Jess,” I said with perhaps a little more sharpness in my tone than I had intended, “some very bad people are after me. They’re on their way here, and they will kill me if they find me,” I said, being intentionally blunt. “I have to get out of here. *Now.*”

Jess raised her eyebrows and shook her head in her best *are-you-kidding-me?* expression.

“No, Elly, this has just gone from ‘I don’t know’ to ‘just too weird’. It’s time to go to the authorities. I’m calling Mom and Dad and they can help us talk to the police or whomever we need to talk to.” She turned, heading for the phone in the kitchen. I shifted and cut her off. She jumped back.

“We’re not going to the police, Jess.” She opened her mouth to say something, but I kept talking. “One of two things happens if we go to the authorities. One: they don’t believe us, lock us in a padded room, the bad guys find us and kill me. Or, two: they do believe us, lock us away for questioning, the bad guys find us and kill me. Either way, we wind up in a nice little box where the bad guys can get to us and I die. Besides, Jess, just how would any police officer, soldier, or CSIS agent stand a chance against bad guys who can do what we can do? The only chance I have is with them,” I said jerking my head in the guys’ general direction. Jess hesitated, considering the four of us in turn. “Jess, you have to trust me on this. I *know* this is what I need to do.”

Jess turned to give me a stern look.

“Oh, sure,” Jess said with a sarcastic edge to her words, “like all of those other times you did crazy things just because you *knew* it was the right thing to do?”

“Name one time it didn’t work out,” I challenged, locking eyes with Jess.

Jess opened her mouth then closed it again. Her shoulders slumped in defeat.

“Exactly,” I said. “I have to go.” I turned to Theo. “Don’t let her near the phone.” Jess glanced at Theo nervously. I moved past Jess, heading to my room. Jess spun and hurried after me, following several steps behind me.

I grabbed my backpack dumping my texts out onto my desk. They landed with a resolute thud. I did a double-take at the texts, slightly unnerved by the finality of the sound. I put my pack on my bed and threw in essentials: jeans, t-shirts, socks, underwear, pyjamas, and a book or two. I added a heavy sweater and a pair of sweats. Jess only stood beside my bed watching me as I dashed around my room. She appeared decidedly unhappy.

“I don’t like this, Elly,” she said worriedly. “I mean, okay, you’ve shown me what you can do, and I admit you have an inside track here with what you *know*, but this is insane. If you insist on going with these guys at least let me come with you.”

I stopped my whirlwind packing foray and cast Jess a skeptical arch of one eyebrow.

“Do you honestly think you can keep up Jess?” I asked. Jess just frowned and didn’t answer, looking away instead. “I’m sorry, Jess. I appreciate what you’ve done for me in the past, but this is one time you can’t help me. Besides, I can handle this one.” I flinched, feeling another sharp jab from the same claws of dread that had dug into me in the Bowl. I shoved the

thought aside—I couldn't waver in front of Jess. "Hey," I continued in what I hoped was a lighter tone, "with any luck I'll be back in a few days, and this will all be over. Will you be all right without me?"

"I'll be just fine. The trouble always follows *you*," she reminded me in a somewhat disgruntled tone. I grabbed my pack, tossing it over my shoulder and headed for the door. I took one step then turned a cautious eye on Jess.

"You won't tell Mom and Dad, will you? I mean, I don't want you to lie, but if they ask just tell them I went away with friends for the weekend.

She folded her arms across her chest.

"And you don't think that will make them suspicious?" she asked, raising her eyebrows.

I frowned then turned and hurried out the door.

"Just do the best you can, Jess," I called back over my shoulder. "'Leaving with friends' will be easier for them to believe than 'being chased by bad guys'."

Jess gave a sardonic chuckle as she followed after me.

"I wouldn't be too certain of that, but I'll do my best to avoid questions for the weekend."

I grabbed my toiletries bag on my way past the bathroom and shoved it into my pack. I hurried down the hall to where the others waited.

"Do you have your phone?" Jess called after me.

I was just checking my pocket (it was empty) when Liam said, "Don't bother. It won't do you any good where we're going. Sorry Jessica, you won't be able to reach her."

"Where *are* you going?" Jess asked.

"We'd rather not say," Ethan interjected. "Elly, do you have a warm jacket?" I reached into the closet and pulled out my winter jacket as Ethan took my bag. He held the door open, waiting for me to go through.

I turned back to Jess, surprised to see her lip trembling and her face starting to crumple.

"Oh, Jess," I said, stopping to give her a quick hug. I pulled back only to stumble over her tear-filled eyes. "I'll be all right. I'll see you soon." Jess only nodded, her face taking on a reddish hue. I hesitated. Watching Jess now was like having the camera screen on an iPad turn one hundred and eighty degrees and seeing the other side of the picture. Jess didn't *know* what I knew and to her—and now suddenly to me too—this all seemed very big and very unreal, and frankly, more than a little scary. I have to say I wouldn't have cared to be standing in Jess' shoes just at that particular moment. I watched as fear turned Jess' eyes an indigo blue. My chest tightened and I drew in a shallow breath. Ethan was there then, taking my elbow and looking down at me with concern etched on his brow.

"I'm sorry, Elly," he said quietly, steering me toward the door, "but Jessica will be safer with you gone."

My eyes snapped up to meet his dark blue gaze, and I felt my breath catch. I turned back to Jess then.

"Good bye Jessica," Ethan said. "Don't worry. We'll keep her safe."

Jess only nodded again and gave a feeble wave.

The four of us hurried out of the building and to the car. Ethan threw my bag into the trunk while Liam opened the back door for me. He slid in beside me as Ethan and Theo dropped into the front seats. I glanced back at the apartment and saw Jess standing at the window watching us leave. I had a mental image of her standing there, waiting in the same spot, until I got back. I swallowed hard and forced myself to turn away.

Ethan looked at me in the rearview mirror as we drove away. "We need to stop at my house

to pick up our things. We'll leave immediately after that. It's quite a long drive."

"Why can't we just shift up and run to wherever it is we're going?"

"Because we have supplies to carry. We may be able to do it, but carrying so much equipment would slow us down. It's almost as fast to take the car and will be less taxing for you."

"Don't worry about me. I can fend for myself." My thoughts flashed back to the evening Ethan and I had run to his house.

Might be fun.

Theo turned back to me, frowning. "Yeah, we've seen how you 'fend for yourself'," he said with some amount of censure. "*We're* safer if *you're* contained in the car."

"Fine, take the stupid car then if you want to go slow," I said, making a face. Theo chuckled and looked ahead again. I turned to look sullenly out the window.

Spoilsports.

We reached Ethan's house and pulled the car into the garage. Ethan opened the car door for me but didn't offer me his hand as I pulled myself up out of the seat. Liam led us into the house while Ethan placed his hand on the centre of my back, ushering me forward. We entered the kitchen, and Liam stopped abruptly. We all kind of stacked up behind him like a train pile-up. I looked up at Liam as he reached back to steady me, then followed his gaze to where a man stood by the kitchen table. Ethan stepped past Liam, casting the man a casual glance.

"Timothy, you're back," Ethan said, moving further into the kitchen. Timothy bowed his head to Ethan then fixed his gaze on Liam. Liam didn't move. He only stood, holding me back with one arm as he eyed Timothy warily.

"Yes sir," Timothy responded, turning his attention back to Ethan. "I've wrapped up my assignment. I was to report back to you when it was complete."

"Excellent timing. I need you to take a message to my father. Can you do that?" Ethan asked, continuing on into the room.

"Yes, sir," Timothy said with a slight nod of his head.

"Good. I'll be right with you." Ethan turned to me then. "Why don't you have a seat in the living room while we pack a few things?"

"Isn't there something I can do to help instead?"

"Possibly," Ethan said, a vaguely surprised expression crossing his face. "If you want to help, why don't you collect some food and supplies? You'll need food for several days—make it closer to a week, just to be safe."

"How many am I packing for?"

"Mostly just yourself, but you can add one meal for Liam and me," Ethan clarified. He disappeared then re-appeared almost immediately holding a large duffle bag. "You can put things in here," he offered, setting it on the kitchen island. "I'll show you where everything is."

"Never mind. I'm good at finding my way around. It would help if I knew where we were going."

Liam looked from Timothy to Ethan who nodded once. Liam fixed a grim frown on Timothy and reluctantly moved to let me into the kitchen.

"Think camping," Liam said, turning back to me. "I have a small cabin up north. It's a little place I built for myself a long time ago. I still go up there occasionally. I'm hoping no one has discovered it, or if they did, they've forgotten about it. It has a fridge and stove in the kitchen and a few essentials: pots, pans, and utensils. There's running water—it's drinkable. Just pack

the food.”

“Okay, I’m on it.” The four of them stood watching me, each one wearing the same uncertain expression. “Seriously, I’m good here,” I assured them. Ethan nodded once and the rest of them dispersed.

I turned to the intimidating length of cupboards and decided I’d better get started. I worked quickly, sifting through the contents of each cupboard, throwing the things I needed into the bag on the counter. There weren’t many perishables in the fridge, and I wondered if that was because these guys hardly ever ate. I decided we would have to make do with canned food—at least it made packing easier. I had just tossed the last item in the bag when Ethan stepped in.

“How are you managing? I believe Liam and I have everything we need. Can I help you finish up?” I shook my head.

“I’m done,” I said. “Unless there’s something specific you need?” I moved to pick up the bag I had been packing, intending to take it out to the car, but when I tried to lift it I found out just how heavy a bag filled with canned food could be. Ethan was beside me before I dropped the handle of the bag. He lifted it easily and slung it over his shoulder as though it were filled with tissue paper. He turned and started toward the garage.

“Hold on,” I called after him. Ethan stopped and turned back to me with a questioning expression. “How did you lift that? It’s heavy.”

“Not if you shift,” Ethan said as though that should be explanation enough. He turned to go again.

“Wait.”

Ethan stopped and turned back again, a vaguely impatient expression on his face.

“How does that make it lighter?” I pressed.

“Can I explain on the way?” Ethan asked hurriedly, “We need to get going.”

I nodded and followed him out to the garage where Liam stood by the open trunk of a car—this one was a deep green-coloured wagon with ‘Volvo’ written across the back. From the look of it, I thought it might be a four-wheel drive model. I could see my backpack and two duffle bags lying on the floor of the trunk. There was a large leather-wrapped bundle carefully tucked along the side of the trunk. I studied it curiously as Ethan carefully settled the bag of cans into the trunk far away from the bundle.

“What’s that?” I asked, pointing to the long leather bundle.

“Swords, knives, and short blades,” Ethan said, closing the trunk.

Why of course. How silly of me to ask.

I mean, seriously, who carries around swords? The idea seemed out of context—an anachronism. An image of Ethan with sword held high flashed through my mind, and I grimaced as I recalled the scene from this afternoon—and the reason for the swords. The thought was sobering and all at once I felt the weight of our situation crash down on me like an avalanche, burying me in suffocating darkness. I sucked in a breath.

“Elly?” Liam asked from where he stood holding the car door open, waiting for me to get in. “Are you all right?”

I turned and stared blankly at him without truly seeing him. Ethan stepped over to me, scrutinizing my face.

“It will be all right, Elly,” he said firmly. “Didn’t you just tell Jessica this was the right thing to do?”

I nodded. “Yeah, it’s just . . . ,” I looked down at the hard concrete floor of the garage.

“It’s just what?” Ethan asked gently, still trying to catch my eye. I lifted my head and met

his sea green eyes.

“This thing is *big* and it’s only just beginning. I have a feeling the ‘happy ending’ is a very long way off.”

Ethan sighed and nodded reluctantly.

“I’m sorry Elly. We’ll try to end this soon.”

I turned away and nodded. I knew he would try, but I also had the distinct feeling it wouldn’t be that simple. Besides, ending this would only lead to a lot of other problems—like Ethan leaving. Either way, the road ahead seemed to stretch on interminably. I suddenly felt very weary.

“Come,” Ethan said quietly, steering me toward the open door of the car. “We can’t end this unless we begin.”

I hesitated, my hand on the top of the car door. I glanced between Ethan and Liam. This time it was Liam who tilted his head to catch my eye. I looked up into his granite grey eyes and took a deep breath.

“It occurs to me,” I said quietly, “that once I get in this car my world will never be the same. There’s no going back, is there?” Liam frowned and reluctantly shook his head. I could only nod, resignation settling heavily in my chest. I squared my shoulders and ducked into the back seat, letting Liam close the door behind me. The report of the car door closing reverberated with the finality of a gunshot, and I have to admit I jumped a little.

Life as I knew it has ended.

Ethan and Liam slid into the front seats of the car and Ethan drove out of the garage.

“Hey,” I said, suddenly realizing something, “isn’t Theo coming?” I watched Ethan in the mirror as he shook his head.

“No, I’ve asked him to stay here and keep an eye on things—just in case.”

“Oh,” was all I could manage to say. Weariness pushed me back into the soft leather seat and I sighed heavily.

I stared out the car window, watching people and buildings move past as Ethan drove us out of the city. I saw the houses and trees stream by in a multi-coloured blur. A scene in the window of one house caught my eye like a freeze-frame picture from a movie. I saw a family sitting down to supper, smiling and talking as we drove past—like something out of a Norman Rockwell painting. I peered in at them, me on the outside, the family on the inside, looking at things that no longer fit into my world. The scene suddenly moved forward again, blurring past along with the buildings.

We drove in silence, each of us lost in thought. As we moved through the city and onto the highway, Ethan glanced over his shoulder at me. I saw the movement in my peripheral vision as I continued to stare morosely out the window beside me. I turned to see what he wanted, but he was already turning away. I saw the corners of his mouth turn down.

“How long is the drive?” I asked, mostly to break the deafening silence filling the spaces between us and pushing us farther apart than the confines of the car actually permitted. If I kept talking maybe we could find one another in the foggy stillness.

“Possibly as little as five hours if we make good time,” Liam answered quietly. “It may be longer. It would be better if we could get there before dark. We have a bit of a hike at the end of it, but we’re not likely to make it before sundown.”

Definitely a long drive.

“Ethan?” I said, intending to fill the time and take him up on the promise he had made

earlier.

“Yes?”

“You said you would explain about making things lighter.” I felt the warmth of his eyes on me as he glanced in the mirror, but I only continued to stare out the window. He turned back to his driving after a second or two.

“As you wish. What did you want to know?”

“How did you lift that heavy bag so easily? And before—with my bike—it’s as if they barely weighed anything.” (And, although I wasn’t about to bring up the subject, there was also that thing about finishing off the chaeli this afternoon. It was just, well, I was fairly certain something like that required a lot more effort than one swing.)

“It’s pretty simple really,” Ethan replied. “More time equals more energy to your muscles in the same second—or minute—which equals increased force.”

“Oh, right. That makes sense I guess. There was one other thing I was curious about. When we were in the park, you started to tell me about how cians were exploring human time. Why were they doing that?”

Ethan didn’t answer right away.

“I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to tell you about that,” he said after a long pause.

“You said cians have been coming here since your grandfather’s time—just before you were born.” Ethan hesitated then nodded and began speaking.

“All right, let’s see ... there had been sporadic interactions of cians with the human world for a relatively long time prior to my father’s time. Largely, excursions were accidental. Then, as more cians heard of the new world, some began to come here intentionally. It was not possible for everyone of course—there are only a few lineages from our time that can shift between frequencies. Eventually”

“Wait,” I interrupted, “You mean not every cian can shift?”

“No. Just like humans, only some cians are able to shift. Like I said, we believe the ability may be genetic.”

“So it works the same for you as it does for humans?”

“It appears to, although there are many shifters who stand alone within their family lines—outliers as it were.”

I couldn’t help but issue a small laugh. Liam glanced back at me, and Ethan studied me in the rear view mirror.

“Then ... that means you’re as much of a freak in your time as I am here,” I said, grinning. “Somehow that makes me feel better.” I heard a low chuckle from Liam as he turned to look out the window. Ethan only frowned and shot me a hard look in the mirror. He shook his head, turning his attention back to driving.

“As I was saying,” he said in a *can-I-continue?* sort of tone, “there were three main cian families who could shift. Unfortunately, two of those family lines have died out” He hesitated for a moment. Through the rearview mirror I saw his forehead crease and his eyes darken. “I don’t know the entire story—it happened before I was born, but I understand the last of those lines came to a tragic end.” He paused, lost in thought for a moment before he continued.

“At one point—in my grandfather’s time—some of those who were able to shift visited your world for their own gain. The results were devastating for the humans. The cian leaders at that time hunted down those responsible for the exploitation of the humans. The rebel cians were killed, or brought to justice in cian time. Sadly, they had already found and corrupted numerous

humans who had the ability to shift. The corrupted humans eventually became organized, forming what we now term collectively as the ‘chaeli’. The cian ruler prohibited any further excursions into your time. He was fearful of the consequences of these interactions after witnessing the tragedies that ensued, including seeing his own people die there. There was a very long period of time during which cians ceased to interact with your world. However, exploration of your time resumed when my father ... ,” he paused to consider his words before continuing, “was a young man.” I saw Liam shoot Ethan a sideways glance. Ethan continued speaking, and Liam went back to looking out the window.

“I’m not certain how to measure the time in your years, but sanctioned exploration of human time began shortly before I was born—perhaps two hundred, maybe two hundred and fifty years ago in your time. Stories surfaced and it became evident corrupted human shifters—the chaeli—had continued the human exploitation begun by the cian rebels despite our earlier efforts to eradicate them. Cians had a new ruler by that time. The new ruler felt responsible for the situation and took it upon himself to assist the humans in ridding your world of the corruption we had inadvertently brought about. In essence, he intended to clean up the mess his people had made in your world.”

“So that’s why cians like you help people like me?”

“Yes. The situation you find yourself in is our fault in a way.” Ethan’s eyes momentarily locked with mine in the mirror.

“Maybe,” I conceded. “Or maybe it’s the humans’ fault for participating.”

“Possibly, but no matter who’s to blame,” Ethan continued, “humans can’t clean up the mess on their own. They need our help to fix it.”

“What did the ruler do—do you have some sort of Prime Minister or something?”

“We have a person responsible for the well-being of the people,” Ethan said, then quickly continued. “Explorers, including both scientists and soldiers, volunteered to come here in an organized effort to deal with the miscreants and to learn more about your time. In order to fulfill our obligation to the humans, we needed to further our understanding of the workings of your world. We wanted to understand the science surrounding our two times: how our two frequencies differed and how they might interconnect. There were also questions surrounding the differing physiology between our two races. We knew persons displaced from their own time—both humans and cians—were not viable in the other time and we were curious as to why. There were many things we were trying to learn while we sought to weed out the rebellious shifters—both human and cian—who remained.” Ethan paused at that point, and I interrupted him before he could begin again.

“So your soldiers came to protect us and your scientists came to study us?” I asked. Ethan nodded. “And you’re one of the soldiers? You’re just following orders—on an assignment—right?” Yes, the thought hurt, and yes I asked the question anyway. If I was insignificant, if I was just another assignment that would soon be done and forgotten, I needed to know that. There was no sense in letting a tenacious thing like hope grow, weed-like, only to have to kill it later. Once started, the roots of hope grew deep. I saw Liam cast Ethan a sideways glance, watching him, waiting for Ethan to answer. Ethan didn’t look at him—or me—he only watched the road.

“I am,” Ethan finally said.

And there’s your answer.

Liam turned away then with a slight shake of his head. I felt a pain that squeezed my chest, making it difficult to breathe. I knew it was there, but like the bully that you have to face every

day in the school hallway, I also knew there was no avoiding this pain once it had me in its sights. I took a breath and shoved the pain down somewhere deep.

“Why are they still at work? The chaeli, I mean,” I asked, holding a tight rein on my voice. “Haven’t they all been eradicated by now?”

“We can deal quite effectively with a solitary chaeli, or even several, but there are a large number of them, and they are always recruiting more,” Ethan explained. “It’s an unending battle. Over the years they have amassed an army of human shifters and have grown significantly in numbers. These shifters live among humans while they can, carrying out their leader’s orders. But the chaeli decline physically over time and become distorted and inhuman. When they can no longer pass for humans, they live in the frames beyond human sight, tracking other humans and either recruiting them or killing them.”

“We might make more of a dent in their organization,” Ethan went on, “if we could reach their leaders, Corbett and Delano, but we’re having difficulty finding them. They stay well hidden and protected by a large number of chaeli. We’ve recently acquired . . . ,” he stopped, searching for the right word, “. . . an *asset* and may make some inroads now.” I saw him exchange another glance with Liam. “However, my immediate concern is ensuring your safety. We will deal with the leaders as we may.”

“What is it the chaeli are trying to do? And why would *humans* join *them*?”

“We’re not entirely certain what”

“No one knows their ultimate plan,” Liam cut in, his words coated with bitterness. He watched the scene passing by outside the window as he spoke, not looking at Ethan or me. “At present, greed and the quest for power play a large part in their activities. As their army grows, so does their power over the humans and the number of their possessions. They seek out gifted humans in order to recruit them and expand their army. Those humans are rewarded handsomely if they join and mostly they need no other motivation. Those who refuse to join them are destroyed—another powerful incentive for joining the chaeli ranks. Corbett and Delano won’t risk an opposing force developing among humans who can shift.”

“So,” I began slowly as I put the pieces together, “they want me to join them then?” Liam turned his head in my direction, but not enough to look at me.

“No,” he said flatly, “I don’t think they’ll be giving you that option. Given your skills and abilities, I don’t think Corbett and Delano would risk letting you live. You’d be too powerful of an enemy if you were to realize the full extent of your skills and stand against them.”

Nice.

We each sank back into our own insulating silence. I leaned into the seat, resting my head against the headrest and staring out the window. I could have said my thoughts were in disarray, but the truth was few thoughts were running through my mind at all. Only a parade of simple questions traipsed through my head: How many people like myself were gone from human time? Or worse, how many had joined Corbett and Delano and were helping them against their own people? If shifting was a familial trait, had some of those corrupted or destroyed humans been my ancestors?

Bushes and trees—at first solitary dots along the highway then becoming a thick procession—raced past my window in a hypnotizing streak of green. I listened to the quiet hum of the engine and the whirring of the tires on the highway below, punctuated infrequently by the sharp whine of a car passing in the opposite direction. If I concentrated just a little, I could slow the sights and sounds down just enough to watch them move more precisely. After a time I tired of that and closed my eyes, thinking this had been one of the longest days of my life.

Little did I know ...

From somewhere far off I heard someone calling my name. It was the smooth warmth embedded in the words that caught my attention. I couldn't see anything through the thick darkness. It clung to me as though I was submerged in a black mire, pressing in on me from every direction. I was aware of only one thing: Ethan's voice.

I tried to find him—tried to fight my way through the darkness to where he was, but I wasn't able to move. I couldn't feel where my body was, or even my own breathing—couldn't even hear my heartbeat.

I couldn't feel those things, but I could feel fear. Not because I couldn't move or speak, but because I was certain Ethan would give up his search for me and leave me there, alone in the darkness. I tried to shake off my immobility, but couldn't tell if I was moving. I couldn't even tighten my muscles. I thought maybe my breathing and heartbeat quickened as panic set in, but couldn't be certain of that. I listened as Ethan's calls grew louder. I felt a sudden jolt of energy in my hand. It moved up my arm with a welcomed speed, and I could feel my arm again. I sat up with a gasp, and a sudden rush of air filled my lungs. I tried to catch my breath while my pulse hammered in my temples and my heart flailed against my ribs.

My eyes flew open and darted around frantically. I found myself in the back seat of Ethan's car with Ethan leaning over me. His brow was furrowed, and despite the muddy glow of the interior light, I could see his eyes were a deep blue.

"Elly?" he asked softly. I stared stupidly at him for a moment before answering, swimming in the relief of finding him before he had given up his search. I glanced down to see my hand wrapped tightly around his. I didn't let go, afraid I would fall back into the dark waves that still licked at the edges of my mind.

"Elly, are you all right?"

I looked up into Ethan's worried face.

"I think so," I began hesitantly. "What happened?"

"You fell asleep. You were restless just now—calling out. Are you okay?"

"Yeah. Just a bad dream I guess." I peered past him at the small service station huddled in the spotlight of a solitary overhead yard light. A dark, dense forest hemmed in the surrounding area as though the trees had reluctantly retreated from the small circle of light.

"Just a dream?" Ethan asked. I nodded.

"It was dark—more than dark—there was *nothing*. I couldn't see, couldn't move. I could hear you calling me, trying to find me, but I couldn't answer to let you know where I was." Ethan continued to stare at me, his expression uncertain. "It's all right. I'm fine now," I said with more conviction than I felt. Technically that was true, but it seemed as though I were perilously close to falling back into the darkness. I couldn't shake the sensation of being frozen—unable to move. I fought against the residual panic, squashing my claustrophobia and changed the subject. "Where are we? What time is it?"

"We're near a small town close to our destination. We wanted a full tank of gas before we got out too far. This is likely the last available station. It's just after seven o'clock human time. Also, we thought you might need some food. There's a small diner attached to the garage. Liam is getting something for you to eat."

Food, water, bathroom.

"Good idea. I think I'll use the washroom before we go." Ethan nodded and backed out of the open car door. I slid across the seat and stepped out of the car. I had sat so long my legs felt rubbery and I had to grip the top of the car door for support as I stood up. I took a couple of

deep breaths of the chilly, dark air and shivered as I looked around. Ethan handed me my bunnyhug.

“Thanks,” I said, pulling on the thick, fleece hoodie. It was surprisingly warm as though it had sat out in the sun, and I hugged myself trying to hold in the heat.

I was a little taken aback by the surroundings—not by the appearance of the gas station—anyone can guess what a decrepit gas station on the fringes of civilization looks like. What surprised me was how different the setting was from the last thing I had seen before falling asleep. It was like getting on a plane in the middle of a winter storm and getting off on a hot beach.

The light was draining from the sky, leaving an inky trail, but I could see well enough. A wall of trees stood in a line close around the clearing we were in, their branches stretching high overhead, their shadows hinting at innumerable unseen trees beyond. The clear air was heavy with the smell of pine and moist earth making the scant breeze creep low to the ground. Dry leaves had fallen and rustled across the gravel yard on the cool, thick breeze that licked at my ankles as it passed. All else was shrouded in silence as though a pin dropping would have echoed loudly. I turned to Ethan and smiled. “It’s very pretty here,” I said, my tone hushed at the insistence of the stillness surrounding me. Ethan smiled back at me.

“Yes, it is.”

“I like the smell,” I said inhaling deeply. Ethan smiled more broadly and nodded.

I saw Liam come out of the diner, a paper bag in his hand. “Excuse me,” I said, remembering my current mission. “I’ll be right back.” I walked toward the station smiling at Liam as I passed him.

When I emerged from the diner several minutes later, I saw Ethan and Liam standing by the car. Their quiet conversation bounced off the surrounding trees and low hung sky, making its way to my ears in a disjointed manner.

“—let’s just hope it buys us some time,” Ethan said soberly.

Liam shook his head.

“Maybe some ... wouldn’t count on much. They’ll realize what’s happened soon enough and” Liam looked up, saw me coming, and abruptly stopped talking. Ethan turned to follow his gaze.

Hmmm ...

I walked over to them, fixing Ethan with a firm gaze and asked, “What’s wrong?”

Ethan made a face at me.

“Nothing is *wrong*,” he replied with an irritated edge to his voice. In my peripheral vision I saw Liam look down and away, shaking his head.

“There’s something you’re not telling me,” I insisted.

“Minor details, none of which affect our decision-making. We’re just trying to figure out what to do next.” Ethan cast me a disapproving frown.

“What details?” I countered. “Liam found out something, didn’t he?” I turned to Liam. He continued to study the ground, refusing to meet my gaze. “What did you learn? Maybe I can help.”

“No.” Ethan said the word as though it were a complete sentence—which apparently it was. He stepped to the side and opened the back door of the car, a signal that our conversation was at an end and I should get into the vehicle.

Huh, not likely.

I folded my arms across my stomach, giving Ethan a stony glare. “I’m not getting into that car until you tell me whatever it is you’re not telling me.” I realized, of course, I would be no match for either of them if they *insisted* I get in, but then they would never do that.

Would they?

I didn’t flinch, playing out my bluff.

Ethan’s mouth opened then snapped shut, his jaw tight and his mouth pressing into a line. His eyes narrowed and he studied me for two seconds before he turned and paced away several large strides. He raked his hand through his hair as he walked muttering something under his breath. Despite the stillness surrounding us, I could only make out the word “stubborn” followed by something in what I assumed was Ci. He stopped and turned to Liam, his expression a mixture of frustration and pleading. Still looking at Liam, Ethan gestured silently to me.

Liam shrugged, a grin painting a faint line along one corner of his mouth.

“She was bound to pick up on it eventually,” Liam said, shaking his head. “Maybe she *can* help.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” Ethan grumbled irritably as he walked back to where Liam and I stood waiting. “Fine,” he said with frustrated resignation. “But this conversation will take place in the car.” He moved to hold the door open again, glaring down at me. “Your supper is on the seat,” he said in a very controlled voice. “You eat. Liam drives. I talk.”

I gave him a cool smile.

“Thank you,” I said icily and proceeded to slide into the back seat of the car. After the door was closed, I heard Ethan protest as Liam came around to the driver’s side door. I couldn’t make out his words.

“I’m sure she will,” I heard Liam respond when he opened the driver’s door to get in. He was sober as he sat, watching me in the mirror. He shook his head and sighed then started the car.

Ethan got into the passenger’s seat and turned to throw me a sharp look before we pulled away from the station. I ignored that. Instead, I turned to investigate the bag of food sitting on the seat beside me. Pulling it open, I found water, milk, a chicken and bacon wrap, and an apple.

“I hope that’s all right,” Liam said as he steadily guided the car out onto the highway. “It seemed the safest thing on the menu.”

“It’s great,” I said, taking a huge bite of the wrap. I was starving, and whether or not the wrap was actually good, at that moment it tasted like something out of a fine French restaurant. “Okay,” I said after swallowing the food in my mouth. “I’m eating. Liam’s driving. Now it’s your turn.”

Ethan sighed heavily.

What? Was he hoping I’d forget?

“You’re right, of course,” Ethan began in a reluctant tone. “There is one thing we didn’t tell you. I should warn you, however, it will have no bearing on our course of action.”

“Then it shouldn’t hurt to tell me,” I retorted.

Ethan glanced back at me again, the corners of his mouth turned down. “Does every conversation have to be a battle of wits for you?” I didn’t respond, electing to take this as a rhetorical question. I looked him in the eye and stuffed another bite of my wrap into my mouth. After a pause, Ethan released me from his scowl and turned forward again.

“Liam was caught breaking into the house of a first officer named Destri,” Ethan said straightforwardly. “That’s likely when you felt he needed help. Mine and Theo’s arrival

changed things, but we were still vastly outnumbered. I'm not certain we could have fought our way out. It wasn't good. In the end, Destri let us go. The reason he let us go without a fight ...," Ethan paused for a moment to exchange a glance with Liam. Liam's expression turned to one of resignation, and I saw his shoulders slump. He turned his attention back to the road and Ethan continued. "... was because Delano and Corbett decided rather than kill us, it would be more prudent to make a deal with Liam. They ordered Destri to put the offer forward. Destri proposed Liam hand you over to Corbett and Delano in exchange for ...," he hesitated and I saw Liam's head begin to turn toward Ethan. He checked himself half way. Liam lowered his head and returned his gaze to the road. Ethan glanced at Liam, but turned away again, seeming to choose his words carefully "... a *very* generous reward—a bounty you might say. That way they wouldn't have to try to find you on their own, they would save themselves a fight, and they would gain Liam's services in the bargain." Liam's head snapped up as he turned to Ethan. In the mirror I could see surprise mixed with relief on Liam's face. Ethan looked over at him with a small smile. Liam slowly turned back to his driving, a vaguely puzzled expression on his face. Ethan continued. "They let us go so Liam could bring you back to them. I'm certain they will come looking for us when he doesn't return."

"What did he offer you?" I asked Ethan.

Ethan chuckled wryly. "Nothing."

"Really? Why not?"

"Because, no matter what my answer, they would be bringing down the entire cian population on their heads. They would never make a deal with any cian and most especially not with me."

"Right, I forgot Liam's not a cian. But why especially not you?"

Ethan glanced over his shoulder at me with a calculating expression. He then turned back around saying, "Corbett and Delano know my position in the cian army. They wouldn't take on the entire army."

"So why didn't you want me to know any of this?"

"Because it doesn't matter. The only thing the information might possibly do is cause you needless worry. *Obviously* no one is turning you over to them. I didn't want to frighten you." The iPad camera viewpoint suddenly swung around again. I swallowed a bit loudly.

Didn't even think of that until he mentioned it.

"I guess I really wouldn't blame you for turning me in," I admitted reluctantly. "I've caused you nothing but grief." I thought about that for a moment. What if they did turn me in? What if that's where we were going now?

That's quite enough.

I halted my errant thoughts in their tracks. Ethan was right. Maybe I shouldn't know about this. Ethan noticed my silence and turned around in his seat to study me. There was concern in his eyes. No, it was more than mere concern. His eyes were a dark blue—the blue of a churning sea in the face of a storm.

"You know we would *never* do that, don't you?" His tone was almost pleading. "You *can* trust us."

"Of course I trust you," I said without hesitation. "I know you well enough to know that." I smiled weakly at him. Ethan only continued to scrutinize my face. His eyes lightened somewhat and his brow relaxed, but an uncertainty painted his eyes a deep blue.

"We won't let them get to you, Elly," Liam assured me, his expression resolute when I

caught it in the mirror. I nodded and went back to eating my supper, suddenly a lot less hungry than I had been a minute ago. I stared out the window, watching the fading light stain the sky a deep purple, the dense forest absorbing the last of the sun's rays so the trees blended together in one long shadow like spilled ink.

I sat silently as I watched the landscape speeding past.

Chapter 15: Revealing Hideout

I sat for a long while, mesmerized by the unending smear of forest shadow blurring past the car window. I was jolted from my reverie by the car slowing and pulling off the highway. We turned onto a narrow dirt path, the car hemmed in tightly by a wall of trees on either side. The consummate blackness of shadowed trees and midnight sky pressed in against the car windows. I hadn't even seen the path from the highway—it likely wouldn't be seen unless a person knew exactly where to look for it. The road (if you could call it that) on which we now drove was no more than a bumpy set of tire tracks.

Ahhh—four-wheel drive.

The path sliced through dense forest, tree branches screeching along the car windows now and then. I felt a little claustrophobic, afraid I wouldn't be able to open the car door for the proximity of the trees. I wondered if I would be able to climb out an open window if I needed to. We jostled forward, the ubiquitous tree roots disrupting the ride. We drove for quite a while before the path opened into a small clearing just large enough for the car to turn around in. I took a breath as my claustrophobia eased. Liam parked the car on the far side of the clearing, pulling underneath the low-hanging tree branches.

“Okay,” he said, “we're on foot from here.”

Liam held my door open for me as I got out of the car, offering his hand to help me up. I knew enough to take it after sitting so long. It was a good thing too. I stood on wooden legs, trying to get them to move again and feeling unsteady when they refused. I took a few marionette-like steps to loosen up and made a mental note to avoid long drives in the future. I held Liam's hand to steady myself as I surveyed the clearing, unable to see past the small beam of light from Ethan's flashlight.

The air was crisp, but not so cold as to make me shiver—only enough to be refreshing after our long ride. Unfamiliar scents drifted on the cooling breeze, and while I could place the smells of moist earth, pine needles, decaying leaves, and flowers, there were other scents I couldn't place.

Then I looked up.

If I had needed Liam's hand to steady myself before, I certainly needed it all the more now. I lifted my eyes to the small circle of sky open above us and gazed on the most incredible sight I had ever seen: a clear night sky, unmarred by human lights, with innumerable stars blending together like a thick layer of sparkling diamond dust. In the city, few of these stars would have been visible, blunted by the murky glare of streetlights, but here, untouched by dull human light, they shone like diamonds against black velvet. The light from the stars cascaded down, making them appear so close and so bright it seemed as though I could reach up and touch them. No, that wasn't quite right. It was as if *they* were drifting down to touch *me*. They greeted me as someone who had been long away and was now returned home. I inhaled deeply and held Liam's hand so I wouldn't get dizzy and fall as I continued to stare up at the sky.

“Do you like it?” Liam asked quietly beside me. I turned and saw he was gazing up too. He

looked down at me then, a gentle smile on his face.

“Very much,” I breathed. Liam’s smile broadened.

Liam took a deep breath and said, “Me too.” He glanced up one more time then back to me. His smile faded, but continued to play at the corners of his mouth. He slowly released my hand. “We have a long walk. We should get started.” He placed a hand on my back and guided me to the rear of the car where Ethan was pulling supplies out of the trunk.

Liam stepped forward, took his backpack and hitched it over his shoulders. Ethan did the same with his pack. I grabbed my winter jacket and put it on. I wasn’t cold yet, but it would be easier to wear it than carry it. Having said that, the air was cool enough that I likely wouldn’t get overly hot in it while walking. I hauled my backpack out of the trunk and shrugged into it while Ethan was busy with the leather bundle of weapons. Ethan looked over at me and frowned when he saw me pulling on my backpack, but there wasn’t much he could do about it. I watched both Ethan and Liam struggle with this perceived dilemma for a time, but didn’t volunteer any help. I only suppressed a smile—their unnecessary discomfort over a silly backpack amused me in some perverse sort of way.

“Are you able to hike with that on?” Ethan finally asked, one corner of his mouth turned down.

“I think I can manage,” I replied with a saccharine smile. He made a face at me, and I chuckled. I considered offering to take one of their bundles just to see their reaction, but checked that impulse.

Probably shouldn’t give him a heart attack.

I kept my face straight and focused on the practical task at hand.

“So . . . , one question,” I began, trying to see past the beam of Ethan’s flashlight. Its light didn’t reach far, almost immediately absorbed by the blackness that lay thickly among the trees. “How are we going to find our way through a very dark forest with no path and only one small light?” I searched for a trail through the trees, but if there was one leading off into the dark of the forest, I certainly couldn’t see it. In fact, it was so dark it was difficult to make out the trees themselves. We’d lose each other for sure in there. My mind flashed back to my nightmare and I took a step closer to Ethan and the dim light he held.

“It’ll be easier to see without this,” Ethan said, and he turned off the flashlight.

I stood, frozen, utter darkness pressing in on every side and my claustrophobia rising to choke off my breathing. I glanced skyward at the amazing carpet of stars for some perspective. Those wouldn’t be of any use navigating a deep, dark forest. My heart started to pick up pace and I tried to breathe.

“Not so sure about that,” I said, trying to douse the panic threatening to consume me. “I’m not getting how this is better.” I tried to peer through the dark, but my eyes couldn’t find anything to focus on. It was like a thick blanket had fallen over my face. I sucked in a breath and reached out through the darkness, trying to find Ethan.

“It will be quite easy once you shift up a few frames. Care to join us?” Ethan asked. If I hadn’t known better, I would have thought I heard amusement in his tone.

Darn it! I hadn’t noticed—again!

Maybe I shouldn’t be laughing at their compulsive need to help me. “Sorry,” I said, frustration warring with panic. I closed my eyes and concentrated for a moment until I could hear all of our hearts beating. I paused, listening, as my panic melted away into the darkness from where it had come.

I opened my eyes then and looked around. I gasped audibly, my mouth falling open and my eyes widening as I tried to take in the scene surrounding me. If I had thought the star-filled sky was incredible before, it was nothing compared to the way it looked now. It was as if yet *another* layer of interference had fallen away—as though my eyes had truly never beheld the stars before. I stared up at them now, transfixed as their light shattered into shards of colours like a kaleidoscope, each brilliant diamond surrounded by an ever-changing rainbow. I watched the colours in the sky dance like the northern lights. I could almost feel the vague warmth of the light falling on my face like a warm rain, the stars truly coming down to meet me.

“We call that sort of light *callidum vis*,” Ethan said from somewhere close by. I didn’t look at him. I only continued to watch the play of lights.

“What do you call the stars?”

“*Serenai*.”

I traced the light downward, watching as it fell to the ground, splashing into pools of colour and lighting the ground as brilliantly as sunlight did during the day. I turned my attention to the surrounding forest and smiled. It was like looking at a shadowed forest in the daytime. The coloured starlight collected on the branches, leaves, and even the bark of each tree like rain falling sporadically through the canopy of leaves overhead. It lit the forest in an uneven glow and I could see every individual crease in the bark. Even the smallest branch was outlined in a faint, colourful light.

“If that isn’t enough light, focus on the residual heat in the trees,” Ethan suggested, watching me intently.

“I beg your pardon?” I asked, reluctantly tearing my attention from the forest.

“The trees haven’t entirely cooled off from the daytime sun yet. They still have a lot of energy left in them. You should be able to see that energy as well as you can see the starlight. Can you find it?” My brow creased.

How am I supposed to do that?

I turned to the nearest tree and concentrated, doing the only thing I knew how to do: listen for heartbeats and breathing. I must have shifted to the right frame because suddenly I could see it: every plant and tree glowed as if lit from the inside—but then I lost it again.

Darn it!

I looked back at the trees, staring at the line of the forest, trying to find the heat of the trees again. I found it more quickly this time. Each tree radiated with a warm glow as if their trunks were filled with hot embers. The glow lit up the entire tree, the light fading as it moved to the smaller branches, illuminating them only slightly as they cooled more quickly. But where the light from the heat of the tree left off, the light from the stars fell, edging the leaves in their many colours. My mouth dropped open again, and I let out a sharp breath as I stared in wonder at the sight. Leaves, branches, tree trunks and forest floor were suddenly awash in multi-coloured light.

I looked at Ethan and Liam to see them both standing and grinning at me. I turned back to the forest. “Have you two always known about this? How can you know about this and not stay here forever just to watch it?” I wondered aloud.

“It is amazing, isn’t it?” Ethan asked.

“What do you call it—the way the trees light up?” Ethan didn’t answer until I turned to him.

“*Calour vis*,” he finally said.

I took a couple of steps toward the nearest tree and carefully reached out to touch it. I

tentatively placed my hand on the trunk of the tree and felt the coolness of it. The tree glowed with a pink-tinged light outlining my hand where I touched the tree bark. I pulled my hand away leaving behind a bright hand-print on the trunk. It cooled quickly, fading back to the same lighter glow as the rest of the tree.

“And *now* how do you like it?” Ethan spoke quietly next to my ear. I hadn’t noticed him come up behind me, but I wasn’t startled. I gazed up at him, realizing only then my mouth still hung open. I didn’t bother to close it. Instead I smiled broadly, glancing back up at the stars. I couldn’t get enough. Ethan chuckled and I heard Liam join in as he came to stand beside us.

After several more minutes Liam said, “If you’ve seen enough, Elly, we ought to be going. It’s getting late.”

“I haven’t seen nearly enough,” I informed him. “But, we can start walking. I can look while we walk.”

“This way then,” Liam said with a grin. He strode off into the forest. I followed him and Ethan fell in line behind me. Little to my surprise there actually was a footpath through the forest—now that I could see it.

I was so busy taking in the forest and the sky above I wasn’t really paying attention to following Liam. It turned out I didn’t have to. In this frame I was able to “see” his and Ethan’s heat patterns in my mind without looking directly at them—like a heat-guided radar system in my head. If that weren’t enough to keep my bearings, I found they left a faint trail of energy on the ground where they had walked, making the ground momentarily glow more brightly with the heat they left behind. I knew precisely where each of their footsteps had fallen. Navigating through the forest proved remarkably easy despite my distraction with the sights around me.

Along with the additional light came the hushed sounds of the nighttime forest: the scurry of a mouse through dry leaves, the flapping wings of an owl (possibly after the mouse), the slither of a snake through the undergrowth, and, of course, our almost soundless footsteps. Our hike was practically silent as the vast amount of time in this frame allowed us to place our feet carefully and with perfect balance—no adjusting mid step or stumbling. We walked, the trees moving past at a rapid pace—almost as quickly as they had moved past our car when we were driving.

“Ethan?” I asked as we hiked.

“Yes?” he answered in a hushed tone. I noted the smoothness of his voice as the sound caressed my ear and “saw” or maybe *felt* the heated outline of his body glow a warmer orange colour.

“Is it like this in your time too?”

“It can be—for shifters. We can shift within our frequency just as you can shift within yours. When we do shift, we’re able to see all you see here.”

“So things look the same as they do here, now?”

“Yes.”

“Do you ever get used to it?”

“Never.”

“Good.” I was watching his heat pattern as he walked along behind me and “saw” him smile at my answer. I glanced back over my shoulder at him just to see if the heat pattern matched what he was doing. It did.

“You should mind where you’re going. Watch Liam,” Ethan cautioned.

“I am.”

“No, you’re watching me.”

“I’m doing both. I can see ... Hear? Feel? Liam’s energy. I know exactly where he is and where his footsteps fell.” To prove my point, I turned and walked backward placing my feet in Liam’s footprints.

“You can see his energy?” Ethan asked, his brow creasing. I nodded and he tilted his head, studying me for a moment as we walked. “You can see where he walked too?”

“Yeah—can’t you?” I asked. Ethan only continued to watch me as though he were trying to decode a cipher. He shook his head.

“We can see heat when we’re looking at someone. The light we see is called *enlyos vis*. But we can’t see it—feel it—without seeing the person. It sounds like you’re tracking energy—and with some sense other than vision. Turn around and watch where you’re going, you’re making me nervous.” I huffed but did as he asked.

“So you can *see* heat?” I threw back over my shoulder as I walked—facing forward. I “saw” the outline of Ethan nod.

“We mostly use the skill at night—almost like night vision—picking up on the residual heat in surrounding objects just like you’re doing with the trees. At least,” he faltered, “I think that’s what you’re doing. When we shift and have more time we can collect significantly more information from our surroundings—more sound waves, more light particles, more tactile information—any type of information that has energy. We can see more details, hear more sounds, and feel more of the things we touch. We also have more time to store it in our memory, giving us what you humans call a photographic memory. However, true to form, you seem to do it in a way we cians cannot. Somehow, you can collect information about energy itself.” He considered this for a moment then smiled crookedly at me and shook his head.

“So why can’t you see energy?”

“Because everyone’s energy is different—each person runs on a slightly different wavelength from one another. It’s sort of like a fingerprint, each person having their own signature. That’s why we can only see heat. Another person’s energy would have to be tuned exactly to our own for us to see it and that’s as likely as sharing another person’s fingerprints.”

“So why can I see everyone?” I asked, feeling a little unsettled at the thought.

“I have absolutely no idea,” Ethan said with a hint of surrender in his tone.

We kept walking for some time before Liam said, “We’re almost there.” The trees ended quite suddenly and we emerged from the forest as if stepping from one room to another. The sight that welcomed us was as equally amazing as the trees of the forest had been. The forest floor sloped down gently, crumbling into a white-sand beach that poured down to merge with the water of a clear lake. The water stood as motionless as glass, reflecting the black night sky and the kaleidoscope stars. I walked silently and slowly down to the edge of the water, the gently rocking waves rising to lick the fine sand along the shore. With the stars above and their reflection in the water at my feet, it looked as though the air was filled with hundreds of tiny lights. All along the water’s edge the glowing light of the trees made a bridge between the lights in the sky and the lights that danced in the water.

I was vaguely aware my mouth was hanging open again as Liam and Ethan came to stand on either side of me. We stood silently on the shoreline for some time, taking in the beauty of the scene. It felt as though, given enough time, we could become part of it.

After several long moments Liam said, “Come, I’ll show you the cabin.” I took one last look at the scene before me. Maybe it was worth being chased by monsters to see this. Liam turned and began walking toward the embankment. I followed reluctantly, unwilling to leave the beauty of the lake. We came to a set of wooden stairs set into the sandy bank, leading up and

toward the left of the beach. Following the stairs upward, I could just make out the roof of a building. When we reached the top of the stairs, I saw a very large wooden house.

Is this what Liam calls a cabin?!

The house was nicer than a lot of the houses back home and was almost as big as my parents' house in the city. The front of the cabin faced the lake. Windows spanned practically the entire front of both floors with a deck wrapping around the main floor and a balcony spanning the second. The building appeared to be made out of huge, debarked logs, giving it the appearance of a pale log cabin, but on a much larger scale.

Liam led the way, taking us up onto the wooden veranda. A few simple deck chairs were tipped on their faces, leaning against the front of the house beside French doors. Liam led us around to the side of the building where a wooden walkway continued on from the veranda. We came to a simpler door and Liam opened it, stepping aside for us to go in. He flicked on a light and we found ourselves in a large porch with shelves and hooks for jackets.

"You have power out here?" Ethan asked. Liam nodded.

"Solar," he clarified. "Panels on the roof supply power during the day and charge batteries to run things at night or on cloudy days. Its use is somewhat limited during rainy periods and the winter months, having shortened daylight hours this far north. That's why I have the fireplace. The fire can provide light, heat, and a place to cook when necessary." Ethan nodded approvingly as he took in the features of the cabin.

I glanced around. I was warm in my coat, but I could feel the coolness of the air where it settled on my face. The entire main floor was open without walls to separate the areas. The walls were bare logs that had been split in half, giving a flat surface inside while retaining the appearance of logs on the outside. They were finished in a light colour preserving the fresh appearance of de-barked trees.

Against the rightmost wall, a stairway climbed up toward the back of the cabin. I looked up and saw the main floor was open to the second floor through a large square in the centre. A delicate wooden railing ran along all sides on the upper level.

The back portion of the main floor was dedicated to the kitchen and eating areas. Liam had understated things somewhat when he had said the kitchen was stocked with a few essentials. His kitchen was better stocked than mine at home, with pots and pans hanging along the back wall. The kitchen was divided from the living area by a long, low island that served as an eating area with stools lining one side of it. Against the back wall of the kitchen was a stove and fridge, newer and larger than the ones in my apartment. Off to the far side of the kitchen area was a wooden table. Not the heavy-set kind. This one was delicately carved and fragile-looking.

The living room stretched out across the front of the cabin, the far wall made entirely of glass and overlooking the lake. There was a large, thick rug on the floor surrounded by a light-coloured couch, armchairs piled with cushions, and a loveseat with a throw hanging over the back. In one corner of the living room was a large stone fireplace with a small, rough wooden chair set just off to the side. The chair appeared to be crudely made and the frame was not quite true. It didn't belong there—it didn't fit with anything else in the room.

Liam moved into the main area, setting his bundles down on the floor in front of the island. Ethan reached over to help me take my backpack off. He set it down beside Liam's things, along with the items he carried. Liam moved the bag of food onto the counter while Ethan set the leather-covered weapons on the table.

"You'll want to leave your jackets on until the heat has been turned on for a while," Liam said, disappearing through a door under the stairway before reappearing a few seconds later. I

heard the click of a thermostat.

“Your cabin is amazing,” I said. “You said you built all of this?”

Liam nodded and glanced around, his eyes coming to rest on the small, rough chair. “I needed somewhere to escape—a place to rest. I’ve been working on it over the years. I’ve very nearly got it the way I want it now,” he said with a speculative expression.

“What’s left to do?”

“I’m not certain,” Liam said, his brow creasing. “It feels like something is missing, though. I’ll get to it as soon as I figure out what it is.”

“It seems rather well finished to me. It’s beautiful.”

Liam regarded me thoughtfully for a moment. I saw his eyes narrow just before he turned away.

“Thank you,” he said. “Make yourselves at home.” He crossed over to the fireplace and began pulling pieces of wood from the generous stack piled beside it. I went over to the immense window spanning the front of the cabin. I stood staring at the beauty of the cool, still night outside. Only now, in this frame, the beauty lay in its darkness and its stillness rather than in the intricately lit trees and sky. The stars, juxtaposed with the dark of the night sky, hung down heavily, reflecting their light in the still water of the lake. The dark trees blended together in a solid ring of black shadow around the lake’s edge. As I considered the scene’s stern beauty, I was grateful to be here inside the well-lit cabin—with Ethan and Liam. I heard Liam strike a match and a flame came to life. I turned to watch the warm glow spread among the logs.

I looked again at the small chair sitting alone in a corner beside the fireplace. It appeared very old and somehow very fragile. A person wouldn’t want to sit on it for fear of breaking it. I was struck again by the thought that it didn’t belong here—in this time. I went over to it, letting my fingers run along the rough texture of the backrest. I paused, my brow creasing. There was an odd sensation to it, almost a vibration of sorts. No—more like a sound. I listened, the soft hum of the thing starting to make me a little dizzy as it buzzed around in my head. Still, I listened.

“Elly, could you hand me that poker please?” Liam asked as he stood and held out one hand expectantly. I turned to him. I knew he was talking to me, but it was difficult to attach meaning to his words. The chair and its soft buzzing distracted me, and it took me a moment of dull thought to understand what Liam wanted me to do. With one hand still on the chair, I grabbed the poker with the other and held it out to Liam. The instant Liam’s hand wrapped around the poker, I felt time flowing as though peeling away in successive layers, the layers brushing past my face with a warm, faint breeze like the flutter of small wings and the musty smell of an old house. I could see the chair in every layer—each a different scene. I heard Ethan shout my name from somewhere far away, but my only thoughts were for the sensations and images flying past. I didn’t even try to answer him.

Suddenly the pages stopped turning, and I found myself in a small, rough shack of a house. I was standing behind the chair with my hand still resting on the back of it. The walls of the house were made of stones and mortar with one small, dusty window set into the wall not far from the door. The wood of the doorframe looked like scraps from a broken down barn. There was only one dim room, the fire in the fireplace casting a faltering light around the large black pot hanging on the spit.

The sweet scent of sun-warmed straw wafted in through the open door along with a light that fell crookedly onto the floor as if it hadn’t meant to enter and now couldn’t get out again. I heard someone humming and turned. There was a young woman standing in front of a board

propped up on two rough shelves—it appeared to serve as a kitchen counter. The woman was humming to herself as she worked, her back to me. She dropped something in the pot over the fire and stirred it, lifting the spoon to her lips. A warm, hearty scent drifted toward me when she stirred the pot again.

She suddenly turned to look at me then—at least, that’s what I thought at first. She was quite young—perhaps my age—and very beautiful. Her long auburn hair was swept up in a messy twist and her emerald eyes rose up out of the cream-coloured complexion surrounding them. She smiled widely then, and I realized she wasn’t looking at me at all. I turned to follow her gaze, startled to see Liam walking in the door. He looked different—younger perhaps.

Certainly happier.

“Liam?” I asked. He didn’t acknowledge me.

Liam strode into the room and over to the girl, a broad smile on his face. He wrapped his arms around her small waist and lifted her off her feet, giving her a warm kiss. He set her back down and she smiled up at him.

“What are you doing here?” the girl asked him, leaning to glance out the door before turning back to Liam. “You’re supposed to be working in the fields today.” Her expression became anxious.

“Cart broke down. They sent me to fix it.” Liam grinned. “I couldn’t very well come back without getting a kiss, now could I?” he teased.

The girl fought to suppress a grin. With an expression that was a close approximation of sternness, she said, “Very well then, you’ve had it.” She turned Liam around. He let her push him out the door, a mischievous grin on his face as he looked back over his shoulder at her. “Now go on with you before you get us both in trouble,” the girl said, giving Liam one final push.

Liam only grinned more widely and ducked to give her a quick kiss on the cheek just before he hurried away. “I’ll see you at supper,” he called back.

The girl smiled a contented smile, watching Liam hurry away. When he was gone, she sighed heavily and stared after him for a moment, smoothing her skirt before she moved to pick up some fabric and a needle that lay on the table. She dropped into the chair I was still holding (trying to counter the unbalanced sensation swirling in my head) and I quickly pulled my hand away. The instant I let go of the chair, the pages flew past and I found myself back in Liam’s cabin, standing beside the chair. My only thought: how to get the room to stop spinning.

I swayed, working hard not to fall down. Both Ethan and Liam re-appeared on either side of me. They both wore a mixture of shock and concern on their faces. I could tell they were hurrying toward me but somehow they weren’t moving—like someone had pressed pause on an action scene in a video. The room lurched violently, and I reached out to steady myself. Ethan’s hand gripped my arm. I looked up at him—*both* of him—and tried to focus. His eyes were the darkest blue. I began to feel the tingling burn spread up my arm and mentally traced its path as it moved. Ethan was saying something—at least, I saw his lips move, but couldn’t hear him.

“What?” I responded dully when he stood, watching me expectantly.

“Elly, what happened? You disappeared!” I honestly wasn’t paying attention to what he was saying right then. The only thing I knew in that moment was the warmth spreading up my arm. It was soft, but it tingled with a determined intensity as it coursed toward my elbow then moved up to my shoulder. I wondered how long it would take to reach my heart ...

“Elly!” Ethan’s harsh tone demanded my attention, and I looked up at him again. I had to repeat his question to myself a couple of times before it made any sense. Forming a response

took longer.

“Sorry.” For some reason I thought I ought to apologize or maybe I was just stalling for time to think. “I don’t know—I don’t know what happened,” I finally said. Ethan’s eyes were dark but in their darkness I could make out flecks of brilliant, deep green. I liked his eyes better when they were green. He was usually happier then.

Ethan abruptly released my arm just as the warmth had reached my neck. I felt like a kid whose toy is suddenly torn from their hands. I fought an impulse to grab Ethan’s hand and put it back on my arm—wanting to fight against the injustice I felt at him taking it away.

“Elly, *please* speak to me. Are you all right?” Ethan asked. It was the desperation in his voice that caught my attention.

I was fine until you let go of my arm.

“Um, yes,” I said as I tried to pull my scattered thoughts together. “Fine. I’m okay. I’m all right.”

“You disappeared,” Ethan repeated. “I couldn’t find you in either frequency. Where did you go? Back to the hill?” Liam gave Ethan a questioning glance, but Ethan didn’t respond. He only continued to watch my face, waiting for an answer.

“No, I was in an old house of some kind. This chair was there,” I said nodding toward the worn chair in front of me. I took a small step back from it. “There was a young woman. She was very pretty.”

“Did she have auburn hair?” Liam asked in a far away voice. Ethan and I turned to him. He stared blankly at the floor.

“Yes. And green eyes,” I answered.

Liam closed his eyes momentarily, a pained expression twisting his features. He drew a ragged breath. He opened his eyes and looked at me like a man would look at a glass of water after three days in the desert. Crossing the distance between us in one step, he took hold of my shoulders with both hands and pulled me to face him squarely. I leaned away from him watching a dark cloud turn his eyes a stormy grey. Ethan took a step closer to me, watching Liam warily.

“You saw her? You were with her? Tell me what you saw,” Liam said desperately, pleading. Pain turned his eyes the colour of a lake under a winter sky that threatens snow.

“Not a lot,” I answered, my words coming out quickly. “She was cooking. I saw you come in.” Liam’s eyes burned into mine and I hurried to continue. “You kissed her and told her you had come back to fix a cart. She told you to leave to do your work or you’d both get into trouble.”

“What else? What happened then?” He searched my face anxiously. I shook my head.

“You said you’d be back at supper and left. The girl came to sit in this chair with some mending. I was startled and let go of the chair. Then I was back here.” I continued to watch the desperation churn in Liam’s tempest-filled eyes.

Liam searched my face for a moment longer then released me. He stepped back and stared down at the ground before reaching over to run his hand slowly along the backrest of the chair.

“I made this chair for her,” Liam said quietly as he smiled a melancholy smile. “I did a terrible job, but she always insisted on using it. She said it was her favourite.” He turned back to me, his brow creasing. “I wish I could have been there with you,” he said, studying me.

“Liam,” Ethan began, in a low, deliberate tone, “who did Elly see?”

“Cara. She saw Cara.” He spoke the name gently and with longing.

“Who is Cara?” I asked.

Liam fixed his eyes on me and I drew in a sharp breath at the sight of the drowning man

staring out at me. Pain wrenched my stomach and I almost reached out a hand to Liam, only I knew it wasn't me he was seeing as he looked at my face. Liam didn't answer for a moment. He drew a ragged breath before he turned away.

"Cara was my wife," he answered tonelessly. His expression was dull now, devoid of pain and desperation—devoid of all other emotion too.

Ethan and I turned to each other with the same shocked expression. We both looked back at Liam. Liam studied the chair again.

"You must have seen her in our first home. We ... ," His words choked off and he left the sentence hanging, unfinished. He cleared his throat. "That was a very long time ago." Liam's voice was flat and his eyes remained unfocused. His words were barely audible as he stared at the floor, one hand resting on the chair. He swallowed hard and I saw his jaw clench. He glanced at Ethan then at me before he strode quickly to the door. I hurried after him and caught him by the arm. He didn't look at me, instead turning his face away.

"Liam," I said gently, "I'm sorry" I wanted to say more to help him, but I didn't even know what I had done. All I knew was I felt terrible for his pain—felt responsible for it—and I didn't like the feeling. Liam looked upward at nothing in particular.

"It's not your fault," he responded in a dull tone. "I'm fine. I need to get more wood in to dry." He turned the handle of the door and stepped outside.

I glanced back at Ethan who only shook his head. I went to stand beside him, watching Liam retreat outside and into the cool night. When the door closed, I turned to Ethan.

"I feel terrible. What can I do?"

"I think it would be best to give him some time alone. This is obviously very difficult for him. We shouldn't press him."

"You didn't know?" I asked. Ethan shook his head, his eyes narrowing speculatively.

"In the many nights we kept watch over you, he never told me he had a wife."

"I feel so badly for him. I didn't mean to hurt him."

"It's not your fault. He knows that. However," Ethan said, pausing to frown at me, "that's the second time you've gotten displaced in time. What's happening when you do that?"

"I honestly don't know what that is," I responded, shaking my head.

"And you simply found yourself in Liam's old home?" Ethan continued.

"Pretty much. It was like I could feel the layers of time being lifted away and then suddenly I was in his house, watching the two of them."

"Could you interact with what you saw?"

"I don't think so," I said after thinking about it for a moment. "I called to Liam but he didn't answer. You certainly didn't see me on the hill or you would have remembered me being there. I think I'm only watching what's happening."

"Has this happened before? I mean, before you met Liam and me," Ethan asked. I shook my head.

"No, never before that time with you on the hill," I answered. Ethan studied my face and shook his head.

"I don't understand it and I don't like it," he said. "Variables that can't be controlled are risky. I have no way of protecting you when you disappear like that," he paused and frowned at me for several long seconds. "And you have no warning when this about to happen?"

"No," I said, "none. I'd stop if I knew how." Ethan nodded.

"We need to figure out what's happening when you do that." He studied my face for a brief time then sighed defeatedly. "Why don't we get the food unpacked? We should at least be able

to figure out how to turn on the refrigerator.” He grinned. I nodded, still feeling uneasy as I glanced toward the door. I wondered how long Liam would be gone and how badly he was hurting.

Ethan led the way to the kitchen and we began to unpack the food. He studied the interior of the fridge for all of an eighth of a second before announcing it was running. I could hear the mechanical hum of the motor starting up. We pulled the food from the bag and put the items away.

When we finished with the food, Ethan’s attention turned to the bundle of weapons that lay on the kitchen table still wrapped in leather. A long leather strip secured the bundle at either end. A loose strip ran between the two ends of the bundle forming a sort of shoulder strap for carrying. Ethan unrolled the bundle, revealing a veritable arsenal of knives and swords of varying lengths. From amidst the weapons he pulled out a small piece of suede. Separating the weapons out on the table, he picked them up one at a time and ran the suede cloth over each blade, carefully examining the edge.

“What are you looking for?” I asked. He cast me a brief smile—the kind of smile a person gives to a dull child asking a question they ought to know the answer to—then continued his task.

“I’m checking for any scratches or nicks that may have been sustained during our trip. A rough edge on the blade makes for more difficult work in battle. If any edges are marred we’ll need to sharpen them.”

“Oh,” was all the response I could come up with. Evidently, my education had been lacking. Somehow the care of long blades, swords, and knives had eluded me.

Weaponry 101. Must have been absent the day they taught that class.

I watched Ethan work and realized again just how foreign his world was from mine. I sighed.

Ethan was just setting down the last blade when the door opened and Liam stepped in carrying a stack of wood. He looked at Ethan and me apologetically.

“Sorry about that,” he said, crossing the living room and piling the wood next to the fireplace. “I’m not being a very good host. I hope you made yourselves at home.”

“We unpacked the food and the weapons,” I said quietly as I watched him. His dark eyes met mine and lightened a shade. I breathed a little easier—at least I didn’t see the drowning man. Maybe he had found something to cling to for the moment.

Probably shouldn’t go near the chair again.

I glanced around hesitantly, wondering if there was anything else I should stay away from.

“You were able to get the fridge going all right?” Liam asked, turning to Ethan. Ethan studied Liam for just a moment before replying.

“Yes, no problem,” Ethan finally answered. “We have a nick in one of the shortswords, however. Do you have a grindstone?”

“There’s one outside in the shed. I’ll show you where it is but first we should show Elly to her room.” Turning to me he said, “It’s getting late and you’re looking tired.” I nodded vaguely, having no opinion on the matter. I had passed tired quite some time ago. “Ethan, I’ll show you where you can stay too,” Liam offered. He picked up my backpack along with his own and led us upstairs.

“It should be reasonably warm up here tonight,” Liam assured us. “The heat from the fireplace circulates along the floor of the upper level before being routed outside. I’ll keep the

fire going until the heaters are up to speed.”

The upstairs landing was open and spacious. I peered over the railing and down into the living room—I could see most of the lower floor from there. Looking up, I saw a skylight in the centre of the roof that would allow sunlight and heat to fill the main floor during the day.

Clever.

There were a number of bedrooms and a main bath on this level. (I have to confess, I was relieved to see an indoor bathroom.) Liam gestured to one of the rooms at the back of the cabin.

“Ethan, you and I can make do with a couple of the smaller rooms,” Liam directed. “Elly can have the master bedroom.”

“Anything is fine,” Ethan replied, heading into one of the bedrooms.

Liam led me to a large bedroom at the front of the cabin. “You can use my room,” he said. “It has its own bathroom off to the side so you’ll have some privacy.”

“Thanks, but I don’t want to take your bedroom. I’ll be just fine in one of the other rooms.”

“I don’t mind,” Liam said shaking his head. “Ethan and I won’t be doing much sleeping anyway. Just as well for you to use it.”

“Oh, right.”

Liam set my pack down then began to unroll the bedding that lay in a bundle at the foot of the bed. I moved to the other side of the bed and helped. Liam glanced up at me, a little surprised, then gave me a small smile as we worked together to tuck in the sheets and spread out the blankets. When we were finished Liam said, “I’m going to help Ethan repair that sword but after that one of us will be downstairs if you need anything.”

“Thanks,” I said. I met his gaze. His eyes were an odd mix of dark grey and light blue specks. His expression was sober but not as sad as it had been. I turned away—pretending to survey the room. “I really appreciate everything you’re doing for me.” I glanced back at Liam.

He looked down, hesitating a moment.

“It’s no more than any decent person would do,” he responded.

“Are you kidding me? You’re killing monsters to keep me safe. I think that’s far beyond what most people would do.”

He winced then straightened his face and attempted a feeble smile.

“Goodnight, Elly.”

“Good night, Liam.”

Liam turned to go but only got as far as the door. He stopped, one hand on the doorframe. He stood there a moment, his back to me and his head bowed. He angled his head back toward me but not far enough to see me.

“Elly?” he asked quietly.

“Yes?”

“Was she happy?” His voice was husky.

I nodded even though he wasn’t looking at me.

“Yeah. She was humming while she worked.”

Liam nodded in a resigned sort of way and slowly moved off down the hall. I listened to his heavy footsteps on the stairs, each footfall jarring against my chest and making my breath catch.

I was still standing in the middle of the room listening to Liam’s retreating steps and trying to draw a breath when Ethan appeared in the doorway. I jumped. He watched Liam’s retreating figure then turned to me as he leaned against the doorframe. We regarded one another for a moment, listening to Liam’s footsteps and silently commiserating in our helplessness.

“Do you have everything you need?” Ethan asked quietly.

“Yeah. I’ll be fine.” Ethan only nodded, glancing back over his shoulder in the direction of the stairs. “You’ll keep an eye on him tonight, won’t you?” I asked.

“Of course,” Ethan said, casting me a curious look. “I’ll do whatever I can for him.” I nodded. Ethan studied me for a moment longer before saying, “We’ll be downstairs if you need us. Good night.”

“Good night.”

Ethan turned to leave and I heard his footsteps fall gently and quietly on the stairs. I surveyed the room. The long day suddenly crashed down on me and in an instant I was exhausted—more than exhausted. I glanced at the window and was tempted to see what the view looked like from here but I was too tired.

Tomorrow.

Grabbing my toiletries bag, I went into the washroom to get ready for bed. I finished in the bathroom and changed into my pyjamas. It was still cool up here and I hurried to jump into bed and get my bare feet off the cold floor. I crawled into the large bed, pulling the heavy duvet up over my shoulders to shut out the cold. I was surprised to find the sheets and quilt warm but I was too tired to question it and only too grateful to be crawling into a warm bed. Maybe the bed was amazingly comfortable, or maybe I was exhausted, or maybe both. I sank into the soft pillow greedily, feeling the full weight of my heavy limbs pulling me down.

I never noticed taking the step from wakefulness to sleep.

Chapter 16: Our Bad Decision

A ray of sunlight slowly intruded on my dead-to-the-world sort of sleep, bringing me out from under the heavy pull of unconsciousness. I rolled over, trying to shut out the insistent light, but it was inescapable as it poured in through the window, drifting along the wooden floor to the far wall where it rose up to fill the room. I reluctantly opened my eyes and checked my watch: 8 AM.

I lay still for a moment, listening. I could hear faint movements downstairs: the peculiar ring of water bouncing around inside a metal kettle, soft footsteps, a cupboard door opening, a glass being set on a counter. I wrestled with the idea of getting out of bed—it was so warm and comfortable under the thick, soft cover. My mind drifted through a luminescent forest and starlit sky until, without warning, thoughts of evil creatures stalking me stormed in, sweeping away all other thoughts.

Yeah, I should likely do something about that.

I threw back the heavy duvet and sat up. Swinging my feet out of bed, I pulled them up short. I looked down for a moment then forced my feet to the floor, bracing myself for what I assumed would be a cold greeting. Much to my surprise, the floor felt warm. I smiled to myself.

I pulled a clean, long sleeved t-shirt out of my backpack, grabbed the jeans I had worn the day before, and headed into the bathroom. I emerged a short time later, showered and with teeth brushed. I toweled off my hair and left it loose to dry. It would only look worse if I fought to do anything with it while it was wet.

I paused briefly at the window, fulfilling my promise to myself to take in the view. It was amazing—of course. There was no wind—not even a light breeze stirred. Not a leaf swayed in the surrounding trees, and the water on the lake was glassy smooth. Trees were reflected in the water's edge as clearly as though it were a mirror and the sun shone brightly over it all, perfectly balanced in a pale blue sky. Beside the water, the dense forest seemed to stretch on forever, riding the gentle waves of the hills as they rolled out to the horizon.

I threw on my bunnyhug and made my way downstairs. When I reached the bottom of the stairs, I turned to follow the faint noises drifting toward me from the kitchen. Liam was at the stove just taking the kettle off. He turned and smiled a greeting to me.

“Good morning,” he said. “I heard you wake up, so I heated some water for you. What can I get you for breakfast?”

“Thanks. You know, I’m really not hungry this morning. I think I’ll just stick to some juice and a cup of tea.” I looked around. “Where’s Ethan?”

“That’s really not a proper breakfast you know,” Liam said, casting me a disapproving glance. Apparently, we weren’t past the breakfast thing yet. I sighed.

“No,” I conceded, “but I’m just not hungry. I can have an early lunch if I get hungry later. It’s not like we have a schedule to keep or anywhere to go. Do we?”

“No, but still . . .” Liam said, frowning. He poured steaming water into a small teapot and set a tea bag in to steep. I went to the fridge and helped myself to some juice.

“And to answer your question, Ethan went to sleep a short time after you did.” He handed me a cup for my juice.

“I knew it!” I huffed lightly.

“Knew what?”

“I knew he didn’t get enough sleep the other night,” I said superiorly, pouring myself some juice.

“What?!” Liam asked, his tone making my stomach twist a little.

“I said he probably didn’t get enough sleep the other night. He fell asleep one of the nights you were gone.” I set the juice down and watched Liam’s eyes darken as he studied me.

“He fell asleep while I was gone?! So this is the *second* night he’s slept within a week?” Liam asked, the concern evident on his face.

I nodded.

“Why is that a problem?” I asked. Liam glanced over at the stairs then turned to speak to me in a conspiratorial tone.

“He shouldn’t need that much sleep in one human week, Elly. He may be running out of time.”

I felt the colour drain from my face as I stared up at Liam. I had to remind myself to breathe. The fear that had gripped my stomach and twisted it writhed again, making me feel nauseated.

“I’ve been worried about him the past few days. He hasn’t seemed quite himself,” I said in the same hushed tone. I heard the shower running upstairs and impulsively glanced toward the stairs. I turned back to Liam

“He needs to return to his own time,” Liam said with some urgency in his voice. “Soon.”

I shoved aside my more selfish thoughts—thoughts of keeping Ethan with me—and tried to focus on what needed to be done. “Then we can hide out in his time,” I suggested.

“Sure we could—and then you die,” Liam replied sarcastically. “Not helpful, Elly.”

“You don’t know how long I could survive there. Maybe it’s my turn to take some of the risks. He’s taken quite enough of them,” I returned irritably.

“Do you honestly think Ethan would agree to that?” Liam asked, casting me a doubtful look.

Well, yeah, maybe, right up until you said that just now.

I made a face at him. “Then what do we do?”

We both heard footsteps and turned to see Ethan coming down the staircase, pulling a light sweater on over his t-shirt.

“You needn’t do anything,” he said in a nonchalant tone as he came over to the kitchen. “I’m fine.” He sounded like he was trying to convince himself more than anyone else.

Relief flooded through me at the sound of his voice, and I took a several quick breaths. I watched as he adjusted his sweater. His hair was combed back and appeared darker than usual, still wet from the shower. It was longer than when I had first met him and a few strands fell across his face as he walked across the kitchen. He tossed the straying hair back with a swipe of his hand, trying to keep it out of his eyes but it immediately fell down again. He scowled and tried again, having only marginally more success. The way his hair fell askew across his forehead gave him a rakish appearance like one of those pouty models you see on magazine covers. As distracting as all of that was, I forced myself to focus on the issue at hand.

“Ethan,” I began, “if you’re not feeling well, we need to get you home right away.”

“Do you really think I would simply walk away when you’re still being pursued? What kind of person would do that?” he asked, making a face as if he had just swallowed pure lemon juice.

He turned to me decisively. “It’s my job to protect you and I’m not about to leave you a man short.” I felt a twinge of irritation jab at my chest.

Right. The ‘job’ thing again. Yes I know.

“If I’m just a job, call in sick and go home,” I retorted, only marginally trying to hide my irritation and likely not succeeding.

“I can’t do that,” he said, looking away.

“Are you really so determined to fulfill some *job requirement* that you’d kill yourself over it?” I asked in a heated tone. “You do realize that if you die because you stay here too long you won’t be fulfilling your obligation any more than if you went home? So you might as well go home now, because either way, your job won’t be done.” There, that brilliant bit of logic ought to do it. I folded my arms across my stomach and looked at him with just a little *don’t-mess-with-the-big-dog* attitude.

If I were truly honest, though, I would have to admit my less noble side liked the way he refused to leave and hoped he never would. I tried not to think about him leaving—what it would do to me if he did. I might just as well hand myself over to the chaeli if he left—if he took that part of me away. And yes, it felt like he was a part of me. But, at least if he went home, I would know that part of me would be okay—would be safe.

Ethan didn’t say anything. He only studied me through narrowed eyes. I pressed my point.

“Seriously, what good will it do anyone if you die here?” I asked with a measure of pique in my tone.

“I’m not dying any time soon,” he said with a scowl.

“You don’t know that,” I countered. We glared at one another, his stony expression reflecting my own iron determination.

An unstoppable force meets an immovable object.

Ethan didn’t waver. Okay, time to pick it up a notch. “I ...,” I tried, but I couldn’t quite get the words out. They were *wrong*—a lie. I couldn’t *say* them—couldn’t make them come out of my mouth. I closed my eyes, reined in my thoughts and the pulse pounding in my temples, and took a steadying breath. Opening my eyes, I looked squarely at Ethan and forced the words out. “I don’t want you here. I don’t want you to stay to protect me. I want you to go home—*now*.”

LIAR!

No, I argued against my own accusation, I *don’t* want him to stay if it hurts him. I can’t do that to him.

Ethan’s head snapped up, his cobalt blue eyes flashing to mine. I started at the stricken expression on his face then watched as it turned to one of suspicion. Our gaze locked. I forced myself to ignore my racing heart and simply breathe—forced myself to meet his cool blue eyes squarely. To my own credit, I didn’t even blink—but I did bite my lip—a fatal error. Ethan’s brows drew together, one corner of his mouth turning down.

Game, set and match. Ethan wins this round.

“You promised,” I added feebly, trying to salvage the battle. “You said you would do whatever was necessary to keep us all safe—that includes you.”

“First,” he said, his expression softening along with his tone, “you don’t have the authority to order me away, and I’m not going anywhere until we have this situation resolved. Second, my leaving will *not* keep both of us safe. It will only benefit me. You will most certainly be in

jeopardy.”

“Can’t you make him go back?” I asked, turning to Liam. “Can’t you shift him back?” Liam looked at me as though I had just suggested he perform open-heart surgery. He shook his head quickly, a slightly panicked expression on his face.

“No. You don’t understand,” he said somewhat urgently. “I can’t go against Ethan’s directives.” He glanced at Ethan, but Ethan didn’t turn to meet his gaze, he only continued to stare icily at me. I ignored him. “Besides,” Liam continued, “people are too large to shift. I couldn’t even if I tried—no one could.”

I cast Liam a frown.

Traitor.

I looked between the two of them. Obviously they were in league with one another and I was the odd man out. Without one of them on my side, I had absolutely no leverage.

“And you say *I’m* stubborn,” I huffed. Ethan’s brows drew together sharply. “What is it you propose to do then?” I asked tersely. Ethan’s expression softened. Sure, he could afford to be gracious now—he had won. He moved to the cupboard and took out the sugar bowl.

“You forgot the sugar for your tea,” he said in the sort of tone an adult would use to quiet a fussy child as he held the bowl out to me.

Arrgh!

“Thank you,” I said in a reluctantly civil tone. I added sugar to my tea and took a sip then glanced back at Ethan, waiting for him to answer the question. Ethan’s eyes were darker today and not just because he had been angry just now—that colour was different. There was something around the edges of them: a sad sort of grey colour I hadn’t seen before.

“Elly, I’m sorry. It’s not my intent to frustrate you. Liam and I have been trying to come up with a way to end this. If we could get to Corbett and Delano we could finish things, but we’re not certain how to do that. Cians have been trying to find them for many human years and have not succeeded. We’re watching for an opportunity. Mostly we’re waiting to see what they will do when they can’t find you—hoping we’ll catch a break then. We have Theo keeping your home and classes under surveillance in case an opportunity presents itself.”

Okay, finish off the head bad guys and end the whole thing. Good plan except we couldn’t get at the head bad guys. It got us nowhere. I took a sip of my tea, and my thoughts suddenly shifted focus. In my mind I saw the pieces of the puzzle like one of those sliding tile games where you slide the pieces around until you unscramble the picture. Click, click, click, click, click. The pieces slid rapidly into place.

And there it is.

I drew in a sharp breath as I stared vacantly at the counter top. My hands began to tremble, and I set down my teacup before the tea slopped over the edge.

“What’s wrong?” Ethan asked anxiously, his brow furrowed.

“I know how to get to them,” I whispered, ducking my head and placing both hands on the counter to stop their shaking. My knees felt rubbery, and I wasn’t certain they would support my weight. I reluctantly looked up at Ethan. He met my gaze for a moment. I watched as his face paled. He closed his eyes and bowed his head, his shoulders slumping. He turned his face away, his brow creasing.

“How?” he asked, resignation clear in his tone.

“Liam turns me in,” I said quietly. There was a heavy silence the length of several

heartbeats before Liam found his voice.

“Not likely!” Liam objected, offense in his tone and an incredulous expression on his face. I glanced over at him then turned back to Ethan. Ethan’s head snapped back up then. I had seen Ethan angry before, but not like this. His eyes were black as they bored into me, and I leaned away from him.

“I knew this would happen,” Ethan said in a tightly controlled voice as he turned to Liam. “I knew she would come up with this when we told her.” He turned to me next and I held my breath. “This—this one insane idea—is *exactly* why we didn’t tell you about the deal they offered Liam. This is *not* going to happen, Elly.”

Anger overrode my fear. This was what we were *supposed* to do. I was certain of it. Anything else—*everything* else—was wrong.

“Ethan, it’s the only”

“No!”

Great. Try another tactic.

“You don’t understand,” I pleaded, looking between Ethan and Liam and trying to make them understand through sheer will. “We *have* to do this. I *know* that it is the only way to resolve things. It is *the only option.*”

Liam spoke up then. “What exactly are you expecting us to do Elly? Use you as bait?”

“No, I don’t want you to fight them at all,” I said. “This is something *I* have to deal with.”

“And we’re to do what?” Liam asked, incredulous. “Turn you in, collect the reward and walk away? Is that what we’re talking about here?” There was contempt in Liam’s voice and his face contorted bitterly.

I swallowed hard before answering, trying to keep my tone matter of fact when I spoke.

“Yes,” I said with as much decisiveness as I could muster considering I *really* didn’t want to do this. “I don’t care about the reward—take it if you want—but you have to turn me in and walk away. Then I want Ethan to go home. The two of you can’t be involved beyond that.” I met Liam’s incredulous look steadily. I heard Ethan exhale sharply.

“So everything we’ve done up to now to keep them from getting to you would be for nothing?!” Ethan asked. “You’re proposing we just give them what they want and hand you over to be killed?!”

“Elly we can’t do that. *I* can’t do that,” Liam objected shaking his head. “I can’t just leave you with them and walk away. You have no idea what they’ll do to you.”

I heaved an impatient sigh.

No one gets this. No one ever believes me.

“You have to listen to me,” I begged. “Sometimes I just *know* stuff like whether I’m supposed to do something or whether it’s right or wrong.” Ethan only cast me a sober look. “You know—like ‘spidey senses’ tingling?” Ethan’s brows drew together. “Spiderman?” He only watched me in a confused sort of way, shaking his head. I heaved a sigh and hurried to explain, speaking quickly and tripping over my ideas in the process. “I know it doesn’t make any sense. I know it sounds crazy, but you have to trust me—I just have this feeling it will work.” Both Liam and Ethan fixed *the look* on me—you know—the one you get from people who don’t understand a word you’re saying. I tried again. “It’s this feeling I get sometimes. I can feel it at night. It keeps me up if something’s going wrong. I can feel it during the day too—like now—knowing the right thing to do. Jess gets it ... sometimes. She knows it’s always right.” I stopped. This sounded crazy even to me. I turned away, shaking my head. Ethan tilted

his head to catch my eye. He no longer wore *the look*—well, not exactly anyway.

“Are you telling us you can see the future?” he asked soberly.

“No,” I admitted with a shake of my head. “It’s just that I can feel if something’s right or wrong. That’s the only reason I got in your car that day by the river or stayed at your house that night. That’s the reason I sent you to help Liam. I *knew* what I was supposed to do, even if it seemed crazy to everyone else. It’s why I’m asking you to turn me in now.”

Ethan only stared at me silently.

“*Please*,” I said, lifting my eyes to his. “You need to let me handle this. I’m telling you, you need to turn me in. Things will go very badly for us if you don’t. I have to face this—me—only me. If you just give me a chance, I can get to the leaders.” Even I could hear the resignation in my tone as I watched Ethan’s uncompromising expression. The argument was over and I had lost. I could see it in Ethan’s eyes.

Ethan sighed and closed his eyes. I thought I saw him wince. Without opening his eyes or raising his head he responded again, his voice quiet: “No.” It was a complete sentence again. Ethan’s jaw flexed and his eyebrows drew together. He opened his eyes and looked down into mine. “That’s simply not an option,” he replied, his voice rough.

“Please,” I pleaded again.

Ethan didn’t answer right away.

“Elly,” he finally said, “please don’t ask that of me—of us. The chaeli would take you away. You would be alone with no defense. We have no idea what they want of you. From my perspective, turning you over to them will surely result in your death. Please don’t ask me to participate in that. *I can’t do it.*” He closed his eyes and shook his head.

There was no mention of duty or mandates. He *wouldn’t* hand me over because he *couldn’t*. I have to admit I waived—just for a second or two—then tried one last time.

“Ethan,” I said, speaking calmly and quietly, “I don’t believe I’m going to be killed if you turn me in. I can hardly see how that would be the *right* thing to do. I don’t know how this will work out, but I know that if we *don’t* do this, things will go very wrong. Please, you’ve asked me to trust you and now you have to trust me.”

“Elly,” Liam put in impatiently, “how do you think this looks from where we stand?”

“I know it looks like a *really* bad idea. I get that. But I think if we do this we’ll come through all right in the end.”

“What you’re asking doesn’t make any sense, Elly,” he replied emphatically. “How can we act on something so entirely illogical and counterintuitive?”

“Yeah,” I said, my tone steeped in defeat. “You’re right. You can’t feel what I feel.” I turned to Ethan then. “No matter what I say, you’re not going to turn me in, are you?” I asked in a flat tone.

“No.” He sounded as though he had lost the argument rather than won it. I shook my head in frustration.

“Why doesn’t anyone ever believe me?” I asked, more to myself than for any sort of answer.

“It’s not that I don’t believe you or trust you,” Ethan said. His eyes were pleading with me while he spoke. “I *understand* that you may be right, Elly, but don’t ask me to hand you over to them. I simply can’t *do it.*” I glanced between Ethan and Liam, unable to hide my disappointment. Neither of them was going to help me. I turned and walked into the living room, looking out the windows at the wind-blown waves on the lake.

I thought about what Ethan had said, running over his words in my mind. He knew I was right and yet he wouldn’t hand me over to the chaeli? Why not? That made less sense than what I

was saying. Then the pieces fell together:

He cares for you.

That was why he wouldn't hand me over to the chaeli. That was why he risked his own life instead of letting someone else protect me. It made sense. That's what I would do if it were me. I would go against anything, including all of the things I knew were right, in order to protect him if the situation were reversed. My anger dissipated as my hope swelled. Suddenly it was easier to breathe. He did care for me. I didn't know how far that feeling went, but it obviously went far enough to make this difficult for him.

Far enough.

Ethan walked over to stand beside me. He took a deep breath as we stood together staring out the window. I was caught in the wave of energy that emanated from him as it swept over me. I shivered and lifted my gaze to meet his. There was remorse in his eyes.

"You forgot your tea," Ethan said gently, meeting my gaze and handing me my cup. I took a steadying breath and smiled weakly up at him, taking the cup from him. I held the cup between my palms, warming them while I turned back to the window. Stress had chilled me through and the warm mug felt good between my hands, helping to calm my jangled nerves. We stood in silence for several moments. I sipped my tea and brooded over our earlier discussion about Ethan asking for help when he needed it. That reminded me ...

"He's a superhero," I said, looking up at Ethan.

"I beg your pardon?" Ethan replied with an expression that implied he was concerned about my sanity. I smiled and turned back to the window.

"Superman," I clarified. "He's a comic book hero. He has super powers like incredible strength, super speed and x-ray vision. He's indestructible, and he hides behind a secret identity. He goes by the name of Clark Kent when he's not doing superhero things. He's honorable and noble—and very much a gentleman. He was stranded on earth when his home planet was destroyed and he spends his days protecting humans from various evil characters. He has only two weaknesses: kryptonite and Lois Lane, a girl with whom he works when he poses as Clark Kent. He loves her, but he never tells her because he knows that she would be in danger if she were with him."

Ethan was silent for several long moments as he stood beside me, watching the wind dance through the trees outside. When he spoke his voice was low. "So ... , what's kryptonite?" he asked.

I laughed and Ethan joined in.

After a moment I turned to him, sobering. "You really ought to do what I say, you know." He nodded.

"I'm certain I should," he said raking his hair back and out of his eyes again. "But I can't. I'm not going to sentence you to death at their hands. Whether or not that's the *right* thing to do, I can't be responsible for that." I only nodded. I heard Liam walk up behind us and turned to him.

"I need to run a patrol," he said, glancing between Ethan and me uncertainly. "We don't want anyone showing up unexpectedly. I'll be back as soon as I have a look around."

What? Bad idea.

"You're not going alone are you?" I turned to Ethan. "You're going with him aren't you?"

"No," Ethan said, looking down at me. "That would leave you here alone."

“OK—one too many bad ideas here. These are the two head guys we’re talking about, right? Dangerous ones? Likely with *swords*?” I asked, amazed they weren’t getting this. “I really don’t think any of us should go wandering through the woods alone *trying* to find them.”

Or maybe that’s exactly what I should do ...

I tabled that thought for later. “One of us should go with him,” I said to Ethan.

“I am *not* leaving you here alone. With your luck Corbett and Delano would show up the second we’re gone. Liam will be safe enough. They aren’t likely to be here yet anyway.”

“Fine. If it’s that safe we can *all* go on patrol,” I countered. Ethan opened his mouth as though he were about to object, but closed it again without saying anything. His lips pressed into a line and he gave me a frown.

“You’re doing it again,” he said tightly.

“Yes, I am. So are we all going or what?”

Ethan looked down at the floor for a moment then, without lifting his head, he raised his steel-blue eyes to mine. I took a half step back, distancing myself from his cool gaze. He raised his chin, his eyes never leaving mine.

“All right,” he said in a measured tone, “Let’s *all* go on patrol.” He gave me a faint nod of his head.

“You want to take her on patrol with us?” Liam asked doubtfully. Ethan didn’t look at him—only continued to watch me closely.

“Yes,” he said soberly. “We *all* go on patrol.”

It sounded like a threat.

Chapter 17: Strategy

Ethan had us all shift up, and we set out at a brisk pace. The patrol was long, and Ethan never slowed down. Not for a moment. It was a forced march up steep hills, and I was extremely grateful I had been doing a lot of biking recently.

It was hot in the upper time frames too, and the heavy waxed cotton of my borrowed jacket absorbed a lot more heat than was comfortable. Liam and Ethan both wore heavy greatcoats—I recognized Liam’s from when I had first seen him in the park—and I didn’t envy them the weight or the heat the coats implied.

Ethan had studied me with a rather bemused expression when Liam had helped me into the borrowed jacket—likely planning his torture carefully. At first I had said I wouldn’t need the extra layer, but now I was glad Liam had insisted I wear it. Evidently, he had known what we were in for on this little trek. Sure, the jacket was hot, but I wasn’t about to take it off now. It was the only thing standing between me and a million lacerations from the branches and thorns that tore at the sleeves in pursuit of my skin. I flinched every time I heard the sliding scrape of another branch, never knowing if it was going to end up in my face.

Ethan led the way, and Liam fell in line behind me. We followed a narrow path as we marched up one of the many hills surrounding the lake—a path likely made, Liam had said, by animals moving down to the water to drink. At first the trail ran up the hill and away from the lake, but eventually it curved to run parallel to the water on a more level plane. The brush grew right up to the edges of the narrow track, clawing at my face and tangling in my hair despite Ethan’s attempts to keep the branches out of my way. Liam had to free my hair from a bush on more than one occasion. After the third time, Ethan stopped me, took a bottom strand of my hair and twisted it around the rest to secure it in a ponytail then tucked the strand into itself.

When the path leveled off, I realized we had reached the top of a hill. We emerged from the brush and entered a small clearing where the hill fell away down into a small sort of valley. From our vantage point we could see the lake and portions of the surrounding forest. I gratefully lifted my face to the cool breeze rushing past and took in a deep draught of air. Ethan and Liam each took out small binoculars and surveyed the forest below. I stood with them, studying the amazing view, and secretly wishing they would sit down so I could sit down too. Didn’t happen.

After a few short minutes, Ethan moved on again at the same quick pace as before. We wound our way back around the cabin, doing an entire circuit of the surrounding area—seemingly up hill all the way. I didn’t know how long we had been walking or how much distance we had covered. What I did know was that by the time we were nearing the end of our trek, I was hot, hungry, and my feet were beginning to get tired. I kept hoping we were close to the cabin. I hoped that right up until the moment we came to the top of a hill and I gazed out across the valley. We were at the opposite side of the lake! It was at that moment I tripped and toppled toward a thorny bush. Liam caught me just before I fell into it.

“It’s almost noon,” he said to Ethan. “We need to take Elly back for lunch.” Ethan stopped and turned back to look at me with a stern *I-knew-you’d-be-trouble* expression.

Show no weakness.

“I’m fine,” I said a little too quickly as I met Ethan’s gaze. “We can keep going.”

“You didn’t eat breakfast,” Liam stated straightforwardly. “I’m not prepared to carry you back to the cabin.” He turned and studied Ethan expectantly.

“Really—I’m fine,” I insisted again. “Let’s finish the patrol.” Liam scowled at me. Ethan studied me for a moment, his eyes narrowed and I forced myself to meet his gaze.

“We’re almost at the lake,” Ethan finally said, releasing me from his ice-water blue eyes. “We’ll finish the circuit. It shouldn’t take long.”

I saw Liam cast Ethan a questioning frown. Ethan glanced at him, took another quick look at me, then turned decisively and continued down the hill. Liam frowned and shook his head as he fell back into place behind me, muttering something about hard-headedness. I didn’t know if he was referring to Ethan or me. Ethan repeatedly angled his head back in my direction as we walked, but he never turned to look at me nor did he say anything.

As it turned out, it was really only a short time before we were climbing the stairs leading up to the cabin. I was stubbornly keeping up, despite the dull ache building at the back of my head and the heavy weight of my sore feet. I walked on silently, eager to get back to the cabin and find some food and water.

We climbed the steps up to the deck of the cabin. Liam led the way while Ethan waited for me to go ahead of him. I followed behind Liam, anxious for some food and rest and not really knowing which one I wanted first. I had taken exactly three steps on the deck when I stopped short, the blood draining from my face and my knees turning wobbly. I reached for Liam’s arm—whether to steady myself or get his attention I wasn’t sure. He turned immediately, looking first at my hand on his arm then at my face.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, alarmed.

“There are two people in the cabin,” I whispered. Liam’s eyes flicked to the cabin then back to me.

“How do you know?” he asked quietly.

“She can see their energy,” Ethan said as he stepped forward and pulled me behind him. He backed up, his left arm angled toward me, forcing me back to the steps we had just climbed. Ethan caught Liam’s eye and jerked his chin toward the cabin. Liam turned and stole silently along the near side of the cabin, drawing a blade from his boot as he crept forward. He held the blade low and close by his side as he disappeared around the back of the building.

Ethan continued moving us backward until we reached the edge of the deck. He gripped my arm and pulled me down to crouch beside him.

“What’s going on?” I whispered. Ethan held up a hand signaling for me to be quiet. “Go help Liam,” I whispered, “I’ll stay here.” Ethan gave me a sharp look and covered my mouth with his hand. I was about to protest when Ethan stood up slowly. I started to stand up too, but Ethan pushed me back down. He held up his hand again, this time meaning for me to stay put.

Ethan began moving forward cautiously across the deck, heading for the side of the cabin. He reached into his jacket and pulled out a short blade, gripping it tightly. I stood and hurried after him. Ethan cast me an annoyed frown before reaching back to take my hand, pulling me close behind him.

Before we reached the side of the cabin, Liam reappeared around the corner. Ethan stopped short, blade gripped tightly in his hand. Liam stood, his shoulders relaxed, his knife nowhere to be seen.

“It’s fine,” Liam said, rolling his eyes and shaking his head. “You can come in.”

Ethan and I only glanced at each other and followed Liam into the cabin. We stepped inside

and found Theo and Jess sitting calmly at the kitchen island.

“Theo,” Ethan said sternly, “you ought to have announced your arrival. You gave us a bit of a start to say the least. It could have turned into quite the mess—for *you*, that is.” He shot Theo a disapproving frown. He turned to help me with my jacket as he cast Theo another sideways glance. Theo only grinned.

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that,” Theo said, his grin widening. “I’ve been practicing. You might have gotten the short end in that exchange.”

Ethan hung up the jacket and turned back to Theo, huffing lightly. “Not in this lifetime, little brother.”

Theo chuckled.

“Jess,” I said, incredulous, “what on earth are you doing here?!”

“I honestly don’t know,” Jess said, frowning at me from where she sat at the kitchen island. She jerked her chin in Theo’s direction. “Ask Boy Wonder here.”

“Jess!” I admonished. Theo and Jess glared at one another.

“Care to explain, Theo?” Ethan asked, leveling a hard look at Theo.

“I had to bring her with me when I came,” Theo said in his best *it’s-not-my-fault* tone. “I didn’t have any choice. There were chaeli crawling all over the place.”

Ethan, Liam, and I exchanged wary glances.

“Oh, right,” Jess spat sarcastically at Theo, “you and your invisible friends. Everything was just fine. I hadn’t seen anyone.”

Theo’s jaw dropped.

“Of all the ungrateful ... ! Do you know what would have happened if I hadn’t gotten to you before they did?” he asked sharply.

“Theo,” Liam said loudly, interrupting the argument. Theo looked over at Liam. Liam continued, sounding as if he were trying very hard to be patient. “Theo, why are you here?”

“Oh, right. I came to warn you guys,” Theo said offhandedly.

“Warn us about what?” Liam asked with a forced calm.

“The two chaeli who are after Elly found out you left so they’ve decided to come after you,” he informed us casually. Ethan and Liam exchanged another uneasy glance.

“How do you know this, Theo?” Ethan asked, tension in his voice.

“I went to check on Jessica like you ordered.” Theo and Jess exchanged scowls at that point. “I was still shifted up when I got to the apartment. I saw chaeli all over the place. None of them had noticed me, so I thought I might just see what they were up to. I overheard a few of them talking. Apparently they were sent to see what was going on and grab Elly if they could. They must have gotten some information somehow. They knew the three of you had left town.” Theo turned to give Jess a sharp look. “I think they heard Jessica talking to your mother,” he said, accusingly. Jess turned away from him as if she could ignore him. “Anyway, they were talking about where you might have gone and one of them mentioned this place. I guess someone remembered it after all. I heard them planning to grab Jessica and bring her here to trade her for Elly. I barely got to her before they did. I knew she couldn’t shift and I couldn’t think of any other place where we could keep her safe.”

I heard Liam mutter something unintelligible under his breath. It was only one word and I couldn’t make it out, but he definitely wasn’t pleased. Ethan sighed and raked his hand through his hair before looking back up at Theo.

“Well done, Theo,” Ethan said sincerely. “Thank you. Are you all right?”

“Sure, I’m fine.” Theo turned to me then. “But *you* owe me for spending the last five hours

in the car with *her*,” he said jerking his chin in Jess’ direction.

“Me?!” Jess huffed, “I”

“Jess!” I said tersely. She stopped and turned to me with an overly innocent expression. “Enough. Theo just saved your life and likely mine too. You could show a little gratitude.”

Jess’ gaze flicked to Theo just before she turned away sullenly.

“I honestly didn’t think anyone knew about this place,” Liam said apologetically.

“It’s not your fault, Liam,” Ethan reassured him. “We’ll deal with it.”

“But I . . . ,” Liam began, a confused expression on his face. Ethan held up a hand to silence him.

“I know,” Ethan interrupted. “It’s not your fault. Really.” Liam studied Ethan a moment longer, his confusion deepening.

“Even if they find the car, do you think they can find the cabin?” Ethan asked Liam. “It’s not an obvious path.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Liam replied. “They’ll find the cabin easily enough once they reach the lake. Just a matter of heading along the shore until they see it.”

“Theo, any idea how long before they get here?” Ethan asked.

Theo shook his head.

“They had to report back to Corbett and Delano. It sounded like that would take some time—humanly speaking. My guess is some time . . . *tomorrow*—is that the right word? But that’s a guess. Can’t see them making it today. Not enough time to report back and get out here.”

“At least a 24 hours head start then.” Ethan nodded. He stepped toward me and placed a hand on the small of my back, moving me toward the stairs. “All right. Everyone pack up. We’re leaving within the hour.”

No! Bad idea! Very bad idea!

I halted in mid stride. Ethan continued past me a step or two before turning to give me a questioning look.

“Where are we going?” I asked anxiously. This was wrong. It was absolutely the wrong thing to do. My heart picked up its pace.

“I’ll come up with something before we go,” Ethan said. “I want you out of here before they have time to find us.”

“And then what?” I asked, the panic rising in my chest. “Keep running? For how long? And now we have Jess slowing us down. Sooner or later they’ll catch us.”

“Not as long as I’m here,” Ethan responded resolutely, continuing to move me forward. I stopped again, earning an annoyed frown from Ethan.

“And how long will that be?” I asked pointedly, giving him a cool arch of an eyebrow. He glared at me. “Ethan, we can’t keep running forever. This is a perfect opportunity. I still think we should”

“No!” Ethan and Liam chorused together. I opened my mouth to object, but Ethan cut me off.

“We’ve had that discussion,” he said. “We’re leaving. Please go pack,” he ordered in a firm tone. I folded my arms across my stomach and glared at him. Ethan closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

“Elly, please don’t start,” he pleaded.

“What is she on about?” Theo asked.

“She wants us to turn her over to Corbett and Delano,” Liam answered, frowning.

“Good idea!” Theo said enthusiastically. I would have laughed if I hadn’t been trying to

stare down Ethan at that moment. Ethan turned away first, shooting a baleful glare at Theo.

“*Thelonius!*” Ethan barked.

“Idiot!” Jess muttered at the same time.

“What?” Theo asked innocently, raising his hands, palms up. “She’s the perfect bait,” he said defensively. “We can finally get to the leaders.”

Yes!

At last I had an ally—even if it was only Theo. Ethan turned back to me and opened his mouth to say something, but I cut him off.

“Fine,” I said with some determination. “If you won’t hand me over to them we could at least try to end this now. You did say no one could get to them. This is a perfect opportunity. Theo’s right, I am the perfect bait. Let them come get me. Can we defeat them if it comes down to a fight?” I asked, turning to Liam for an answer. An outright fight wasn’t my first choice, but we were running out of options.

“Yeah, we should be able to handle them in a fight,” Liam admitted reluctantly.

“So why don’t we stay and fight?” Theo suggested eagerly. “The three of us can take them. Besides, if we take out Delano and Corbett, there’s no one left to come after her. It would end this pretty quickly and it would protect other humans. We’ve never had an opportunity like this before.”

Three of them? I don’t think so. Try ‘four of us’.

“Not helping, Theo,” Ethan cautioned, his eyes darting to Theo before turning back to me.

“It makes sense,” I reasoned. “You won’t turn me in, and we can’t run from them forever. It’s the only way to end this before it’s too late for you. You obviously don’t have a lot of time left. Liam thinks we can beat them, and we need to do this quickly.” I struggled to sound enthusiastic about the idea. Sending Ethan home was more of a double-edged sword for me. Theo glanced at me in alarm and abruptly stepped between Ethan and me.

“*Hwyeth meiwain uma ni?*” Theo asked anxiously. Ethan didn’t answer. He only turned away. I couldn’t be certain what Theo had said, but he obviously wasn’t happy. I decided to add fuel to the fire.

“He’s been sleeping a lot lately,” I offered, continuing to watch Ethan. Ethan shot me a hard look, and I returned it in kind.

Theo put his hand on Ethan’s shoulder and turned him around.

“You’re coming home—*now*,” Theo demanded. He tried to sound stern, but the tremor in his voice made the order sound more like a plea.

“You know I can’t do that. I have to stay.”

Theo raised his voice a decibel, desperation darkening his brown eyes. “*Nei! Na cun I’ chi!* We will *not* go through that again! If I have to I’ll have Father order you home.” Ethan’s eyes darted to meet Theo’s. He glanced over at me then back at Theo.

“Theo,” I said, “if Ethan won’t turn me in at least let him stay long enough to deal with Corbett and Delano. Then you take him home. His job will be finished and he’ll be safe as soon as he leaves. It should only be another day or two, right?” Turning to Ethan I presented him with his alternatives: “You have three options: you can use me as bait; you can turn me in; or Theo can take you home immediately. Your choice.”

Ethan’s mouth gaped open for a moment. He glanced up at the ceiling and heaved a sigh. He looked at me then, anger turning his eyes the colour of a midnight sky.

“Remind me never to play chess with you.” He stared at me a moment longer, and I met his

gaze without flinching. He turned helplessly to Liam then.

“I’m certain we can defeat them if it comes to a fight,” Liam offered. “That shouldn’t be a problem. Corbett and Delano are good, but they’re still only chaeli, after all. In general, chaeli don’t fight well.”

Ethan considered each of us in turn.

“All right,” he said tersely. “We’ll fight them.”

“Are you guys insane?!” Jess asked. “I think we’re in a little over our heads here. We have to get some help.”

I glared at her. I wasn’t about to let her derail things now.

“We’ve been through this Jess,” I said sternly.

“But . . .”

She still doesn’t get this!

Perhaps another demonstration was in order. I shifted up out of Jess’ sight then pulled Ethan’s sword from the sheath at his hip. Ethan jumped, reaching instinctively for the sword but checked the movement. He may have realized what I was doing, or maybe his sword had disappeared. I wasn’t certain and it didn’t matter. I moved to stand in front of Jess and shifted back down, holding the sword up in front of me. Jess scooted back on her stool and gasped. Theo chuckled.

“Jess,” I said straightforwardly, “we are fighting enemies who can do what I just did—an enemy who will not hesitate to use their sword before you even see it coming. Now just whom do you think is going to help us with that? We’re on our own here and the people in this room are the only ones who have any hope of defeating the bad guys.” Jess was silent, staring up at me with wide eyes. That unsettled me slightly—Jess’ lack of response. Chastising, sarcasm, demands—these things I knew what to do with, but Jess had never been silent before. I stood my ground and watched her intently, waiting. After several long moments she finally nodded without saying a word.

Wow. That actually worked. Now if only I could do that with Ethan ...

I handed Ethan his sword and he slid it back into its sheath. He looked down at me, consternation darkening his eyes to a deep blue, then said, “We?”

Darn it.

I was hoping he wouldn’t catch that. “I can help,” I said, but there was a little too much uncertainty in my voice for me to be convincing.

“Absolutely not,” Ethan replied firmly. “It’s too dangerous for you,” he said. “We need you someplace safe. Theo can take you and Jessica away from here while Liam and I deal with Corbett and Delano.”

Wrong.

“No,” I argued. “You’ll need Theo’s help in a battle. Beside, Corbett and Delano will only follow me. They won’t come to where you two are unless they know I’m with you.”

“You’re leaving,” Ethan directed. “It’s the only way I can be certain you are safe.”

I was a little miffed at the assumption underlying that statement, but I didn’t think a stubborn attitude would further my cause so I reined it in.

Let’s try something else then ...

“Please let me stay with you,” I said quietly, meeting Ethan’s gaze steadily. He faltered for a second, but then regrouped, casting me a disapproving frown.

“In the middle of the fight?!” Ethan arched one eyebrow at me. “Oh yes, very safe Elly,” he said sarcastically.

Okay, how about logic.

“Listen,” I countered, “if I’m off somewhere else they could find me before you ever see them coming. You’ll have no way of knowing what’s going on. But if I stay with you, you’ll be right there to make certain I’m safe.” I didn’t add the part about me being intent on helping—that was need-to-know info only.

Ethan turned to look at Liam uncertainly.

“Actually, she has a point,” Liam acknowledged grudgingly. “There would be three of us here to keep an eye on her—pretty good odds. You could have more men join us—that would help.” I bristled at the implication that I would be doing nothing in this scenario, but I clamped my mouth shut.

“No,” Ethan said, shaking his head, “I don’t want to bring in a troop of men. This frequency is very risky for some of them and bringing that many men will attract attention. It could very well give away our plan.”

“Still,” Theo said, putting in his two cents’ worth. “her plan makes sense, in a weird sort of way. That means we’ll know where the chaeli are and where they’re going. I mean they’ll have to go through us to get at her.”

“Besides, dividing our numbers is a *really* bad idea,” I added. “Especially if you’re not bringing in any help.” Ethan sighed and ran a hand through his hair, thoughtful for several moments.

“Why do you always have to be so stubborn?” he asked, turning back to me. He shook his head as he studied the floor.

“It’s gotten me this far, hasn’t it?” I said with a wry smile as I tried to catch his eye. Ethan finally met my gaze then smiled wanly at my joke. He took a breath and sobered.

“Fine,” Ethan said, frustration evident in his voice. “*We’ll* fight them. *You,*” he said with a stern glance at me, “will stay right beside me. Your *only* job is to make certain you are close to me.”

I couldn’t agree to that. Sure—I’d stay with him, but I knew if the opportunity presented itself I would join in the fight and I didn’t want to lie to him by promising otherwise. I stared at him trying to figure out a way around this.

I was saved by the bell, as it were, when Theo jerked his chin in Jess’ direction and asked, “What about her?” The four of us turned our attention to Jess who squirmed uncomfortably.

“She can’t be near the battle. They’d have her before it began,” I said—that much was obvious.

“She can’t stay here alone,” Liam added. “Same result.”

“Who’s in the area, Theo?” Ethan asked, still considering Jess.

“Timothy is still at the manor. Father suggested he stay a while before taking another assignment.”

Ethan nodded. “He shifts well. We’ll need to get him here to stay with Jessica during the battle.”

“I can get him when we need him—should likely give him as much time out of this frequency as we can,” Theo suggested.

Ethan turned to Theo and nodded.

Liam spoke up then. “If Elly’s going to be at the battle, she should be outfitted with a sword. She may need to defend herself. I think I have some chainmaille around here too.”

“You want to give her a sword?” Theo asked with a hint of confusion in his tone.

“Good idea, Liam,” Ethan said. “Let’s just hope she doesn’t need them.”

“Can she even use a sword?” Theo asked regarding me skeptically. “Shouldn’t we be giving her a bow instead?”

“A bow?” I asked somewhat perplexed. “Why should I have a bow instead?” I turned to Ethan for an answer.

“Cian women traditionally fulfill the role of archers in a battle,” Ethan explained. “They participate in the battle, but do so from the safety of a specified vantage point—typically placed well behind the front battle lines.” Turning to Theo he said, “This situation isn’t typical, Theo. She hasn’t yet had training in archery, and she will need to stay with me. There is no safe vantage point for her. She knows some jumps and how to shift well enough to be able to protect herself, but we need to teach her some strategy to go along with those skills.” Ethan considered me thoughtfully. He nodded to himself. “We’ll do that right after lunch,” he said. “It’s getting late, and Elly didn’t eat breakfast. I suspect Jessica is needing lunch as well.”

“What would you like to eat, ladies?” Liam asked, moving to the kitchen.

“I’m not sure,” I said, walking to the other side of the kitchen island and opening the cupboard. “Something simple.” Liam hovered while I pulled out ingredients to make sandwiches. I set the items down on the island and turned to him. “I can manage if you have other things to do.” I stood there, waiting. One corner of Liam’s mouth turned up.

“All right. I’ll go find some gear for you,” he agreed.

Liam, Ethan, and Theo headed outside, presumably to the shed, while Jess and I had lunch. Jess was unnervingly quiet during lunch. Her only question was if the others were going to eat too. I had to explain that they didn’t eat often. Jess kept a sullen eye on the door while she silently ate her sandwich.

Ethan, Liam, and Theo stepped inside just as Jess and I were finishing our lunch. Liam carried a shortsword in one hand and a mass of metal in the other that jingled when he set it down on the kitchen table. I quickly cleared our lunch things before going to check it out. Jess was close behind me, watching the blade warily as it lay on the table.

“Elly,” Ethan said, “could you please come try this on?”

I moved over to where Ethan stood and watched as he lifted the mound of metal from the table. He held it up, and it took the form of a long, square-shaped vest. I took it from him but underestimated the weight and almost dropped it before I could compensate. I looked closely and saw it was fashioned entirely from small metal rings linked together in an intricate woven pattern.

Ahhh ... chainmaille.

I frowned at the thing, trying to figure out how I was going to put it on. One of the sides was open so I started putting it on like I would a coat that opened in the wrong place. It was awkward and didn’t move the way normal material did—it didn’t have any give at all. I reached to maneuver it over my head only to have my hands collide with Ethan’s as he helped me lift it on. The inevitable jolt shot through my hand, and Ethan quickly dropped his hand to his side, but by that time the thing was mostly on. It felt heavy, shapeless, and cumbersome.

Liam stepped forward holding a thin strip of leather. He reached under my arm and tied the open side of the vest closed then stepped back to inspect his work.

“It’s a little long. I can shorten it tonight. I’ll have to try to adjust the width too or it won’t

stay on well.”

“That should work,” Ethan said. “This blade needs a sheath too. Do you have extra leather?”

Liam frowned.

“I might be able to find something upstairs,” he said. “I’ll have a look.” He hurried up the stairs and returned almost immediately carrying a piece of material. He handed it to Ethan. “Hopefully this will be enough.”

“That should do. I’ll work on this later. I want to teach Elly some strategy while we have daylight.”

Now we were getting somewhere.

“Let’s practice outside,” Ethan said, turning to me as he gestured to the door. “It’s warmer out now. Your sweater should do and it won’t be so heavy.”

“Oh, I’m coming!” Theo said excitedly. “I have to see this.” Jess cast Theo a look of disdain, which he ignored, as he went to get his jacket on.

Ethan ushered me forward, handing me my bunnyhug. He opened the door and paused, turning to Liam. “I’m certain you can be of help here,” he said casually. “Care to join us?”

“Sure,” Liam responded with a surprised tone. “This can wait until tonight.” He set the chainmaille down again.

Ethan and Liam grabbed swords from where they hung on the wall by the door. Liam briefly inspected the shorter blade then handed it to me. I held it up, studying it as I turned it over.

“I have a question,” I said, feeling the surreal weight of the weapon in my hand—it felt a whole lot heavier than they made them look in the movies. “Not to be crass, but why swords? This all seems a bit medieval. Why not just shoot the chaeli?” Theo burst out laughing. I glanced at him and he shook his head at me. Liam and Ethan exchanged a grin.

“Two reasons,” Liam explained, the grin lingering at the corners of his mouth. “First, bullets are too easy to dodge when you’re in the higher frames and they cease to exist when you change frequencies altogether. They wouldn’t be very effective. A blade, on the other hand, should—in theory—be in contact with either you or the chaeli at all times, depending on what you’re doing with it. Unlike bullets that aren’t always in contact with you, a blade shifts along with the person it’s touching. The blade stays where you can see it—well, where most of us can see it. Second, the chaeli heal fast and a bullet wound wouldn’t stop them for long even if you could get a lucky shot in. This,” he said holding up his sword, “is the only way to stop them permanently.”

Okay then ...

Liam led us outside with Jess following quietly at the tail end of the group. We went around the side of the cabin to a sun-filled area that had been cleared of trees. The space ran the width of the cabin and edged back toward the woods. A hammock was strung between two trees at the far end of the clearing. It was a warm, sunny space with only a faint breeze.

Ethan took several long strides forward then turned back to our small group. “Liam, would you like to help me demonstrate?” Liam nodded and went to stand beside Ethan.

I looked at Ethan, tall and straight, standing in his long sleeved t-shirt and jeans with a sword in his hand. He made for a fascinating picture. It wasn’t just what he *looked* like (as great as that was), it was all of the ideas the image conjured to mind that fascinated me: compassionate sternness, gentle strength, adaptable fortitude, and underlying all these things, a compelling

aloofness. I knew beyond all doubt my telescopic picture of him was far from complete, and I stood studying him for a time, trying to figure out what I was missing. It was there—something hidden just under his carefully constructed surface, but try as I might, I just couldn't make out what it was.

“Okay Elly,” Ethan began, forcing me to pay attention, “for the most part we stay shifted up during an engagement, trying to stay just ahead of our opponent. It allows us to move quickly while still being able to observe our slower-moving adversary. In addition, we become invisible to them. I'll show you.” He paused, frowning in confusion, then added, “Try to keep track of the shifts please,” he said, arching one eyebrow at me.

He looked over at Liam who nodded and swished his blade through empty air a couple of times to warm up. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Jess glance over at me. I turned to her.

“I'm questioning the advisability of this exercise,” she said flatly. I only smiled at her then turned back to the demonstration. Poor Jess. This must be like being plunged into a pool of very cold water. Unfortunately, there was no way to ease her into this gently.

Ethan and Liam turned and pointed their swords at one another. I watched, paying close attention to Ethan's image, watching for it to fade slightly. He must have disappeared from view (although I still didn't see the transition) because Liam began searching the area, trying to find him. Liam took a blind swing as he turned. It was a good guess. Ethan was in the way of the swing, but he easily leapt aside from the slower-moving blade before it was half way through its arc. Ethan swung himself back around so he was in front of Liam, placing his blade mere centimeters from Liam's chest. Ethan shifted down then, and Liam drew himself up short when he saw the blade. He grinned and shook his head. Ethan smiled.

“Oh yes,” Jess said sarcastically. “Playing with sharp swords is a game to them. Where *did* you find these guys?”

I shot her a frown and turned back to listen to what Ethan was saying.

Ethan lowered his blade and turned back to me. “That strategy works great until your opponent shifts too. Then you're back on equal footing. However, having the enemy in a higher frame can be advantageous at times. If both of you are moving very quickly, you can throw off their timing with a sudden shift down.” He turned toward Liam and they both adjusted their frames upward—at least they seemed to be moving faster.

“Aros. How is she supposed to follow this?” Theo called over to Ethan. “She's not in the same frame as we are.”

“She can see higher frames, remember?” Ethan said, casting Theo a smug grin.

Theo looked at me. His eyes narrowed and he stared at me for a moment. I grinned at him. Then, much to my delight, he shrugged his shoulders and turned back to watch the demonstration. I liked that. I may not know what frame I was in, but I could do something they couldn't. I took a quick glance at Jess. She had a confused expression etched on her face.

“I assume he's referring to the way they disappear?” she asked. I nodded. “And you can still see them?” I nodded again. Jess only rolled her eyes at me, shaking her head.

“Okay Liam, take a swing at me while I move past.”

Really? Is that safe?

Even *I* was starting to have serious reservations about this type of practice. I didn't say anything though. I was worried Ethan would use my squeamishness as an excuse to keep me under lock and key while they fought the chaeli.

Ethan rushed at Liam who deftly sidestepped him and then proceeded to swing his blade, trying to catch Ethan squarely on his sword arm as he continued past. Ethan shifted down in

mid-stride, effectively halting on the spot. Liam's blade continued on its course through the empty space where Ethan would have been, slicing into the ground with all the momentum he had put into the swing. Ethan immediately shifted up again and somersaulted over top of Liam's still bent form. He landed beside Liam, turned, and lifted his blade to Liam's chin. Liam froze instantly and straightened up away from the blade.

"The key is in knowing which frames will serve you with the best advantage," said Ethan.

"Don't forget," Liam added, "the chaeli can shift almost as easily as we can although they tend to be just a little slower at it. Having said that, I understand Delano and Corbett are very good. They are formidable opponents. Elly, you might have some advantages. They likely don't know the full extent of your skills. You may be able to catch them off-guard and buy yourself some time—once. After that they're not likely to underestimate you again."

"All right, Elly," Ethan said as he took a step toward me and waved me forward. "It's your turn." He stood, hand held out to me, waiting. I inhaled sharply as my stomach tightened. I wasn't nervous exactly, at least not in the sense that I was scared to try my hand at swordplay. What unsettled me was Ethan standing, waiting for me with a sword in hand and a stern expression on his face. I hesitated. I took another breath to steady myself and forced my feet forward. Ethan suppressed a grin.

"Elly ... ," Jess said in a cautionary tone. She gripped my arm, stopping me before I took another step.

"It's all right Jess. I can do this," I said with more reassurance than I felt at the moment. I wasn't lying—I was *determined* to do this. I gently took her hand off my arm. Jess studied Ethan uncertainly.

"Jessica," Ethan said evenly, "I won't hurt her." Jess frowned at Ethan's assurances casting him a wary look, but slowly took a step back. She glanced between Ethan and me then went to sit in the shade of a tree with an unhappy expression on her face.

We spent the afternoon practicing and preparing me for battle while Jess watched. Ethan, Liam, and Theo took turns in the role of attacker while the other two showed me the strategies to use in battle. They took turns spotting me as I practiced the various maneuvers they taught me, although I noticed Ethan took more than his share of turns. That suited me just fine.

There was a lot of physical contact required as we worked through battle moves and shifting frames. Each time Ethan touched me, I felt that familiar jolt of energy, and like the junkie I was, I always wanted more. I hoped no one could hear the way it jarred my heart into an irregular beat or made my breath catch—guess it depended what frame they were in. I was, however, quite certain Ethan knew exactly what was going on. He was careful around me, touching me only when necessary and quickly breaking off contact each time. It became so obvious that I was beginning to get a complex—like I had some sort of plague.

The training was hard work. The physical exertion and the shifting were exhausting. Unlike the others, I still had to concentrate on shifting, which made me slow to respond at times. We all knew what that might cost me in a fight. I tried to practice shifting more seamlessly and managed to get a little better at it by the end of the practice, but I still felt slow.

The battle strategies weren't all that difficult to learn. They were really only a simple bit of problem solving. Just do what you can to avoid the other blade. I was catching on easily and applied a bit of creative ingenuity while sparring with Theo, surprising him and winning the match. I even caught Liam off guard once, but he quickly recovered and thoroughly trounced me in the end. I didn't miss the smug grin that appeared on Ethan's face each time I got a lucky stroke in.

After several hours of practice (not to mention the previous forced march), I was tired, and it started to show. I started to slow down and began falling more often than I cared to. I quickly learned the ground is pretty hard when you hit it full force from a mid-air somersault *while* you're carrying the weight of a sword. Liam gently suggested to Ethan that we end the session, citing my fatigue as the reason. Ethan reluctantly agreed.

"She just doesn't seem as prepared as I would like her to be and we likely won't have more time to practice," Ethan said, frowning.

"What are you talking about?" Theo asked, making a face at Ethan. "She's great. And after only a few human hours too."

"Still," Ethan said, shaking his head, "to take her into battle ...," He left his thought unfinished, looking like he had a bad taste in his mouth.

"Ethan," Theo objected rolling his eyes, "she could practice forever and you would never think she's ready for battle. When have you ever seen a human do what she can do? I'm telling you, she can do more than just defend herself. She might even be able to help."

Ethan shot Theo a cautionary look.

"Not helpful, Theo," he warned. Throughout the practice, Ethan had repeatedly asserted that I was to stay with him during the battle. He said I was to use my newly-learned skills *only* to defend myself and even then *only* if absolutely necessary. I had dodged agreeing to the directive and fervently hoped Ethan hadn't noticed. I still intended to help if I could.

"Do you feel ready?" Liam asked me. "Is there anything else you want to go over?"

"Well," I hesitated, my brow creased as I thought. "I've never been in a battle, but it seems to me that I get the basic idea of it. The tactics are pretty logical and will be easy to remember during a fight—or at least figure out quickly. I don't think I need any more practice right now, but I do have some questions."

"All right then," Liam said, "if Ethan is finished, you can ask your questions over something to drink. I'm thirsty." Liam turned to Ethan. Ethan sighed and nodded, worry darkening his eyes as he considered me for a moment.

"Yes," Ethan said, "I suppose we're finished." He retrieved my sweater from where I had hung it on a tree branch and draped it across my shoulders. He placed his hand on my back intending to usher me into the cabin. I didn't move. Instead, I leaned in to speak quietly to Ethan.

"Why don't the three of you go ahead?" I suggested, glancing at Jess. "I think I'd better have a chat with Jess." She hadn't moved from her spot by the tree. She just sat there looking pale and ... lost. Ethan glanced at her and nodded.

"We'll stay in human time to give you some privacy," he offered.

"Thanks," I said. I watched the three men go into the cabin then went over and sat down beside Jess. "Hey," I said quietly.

"Hey," she said dully, looking up at me like a lost puppy begging to be taken home.

"Just realized we're not in Kansas anymore?" I asked lightly.

"Yeah—about the time they brought out the swords and disappeared." I nodded but said nothing. Jess's expression turned fearful as she studied me. "Elly, I don't know what's going on here. All of those things you were doing just now—how is that even possible?"

"They call it *shifting*. It has to do with how we use time. Just think of it as an extension of some of the things I can already do."

"Elly," Jess said, shaking her head, "I've been watching your freak show all my life and mostly it never bothered me, but this ... this goes way beyond your usual weird."

“I know and I’m sorry. But Jess, it’s going to make things really difficult for everyone if you have a meltdown right now. You’re going to have to keep it together for the next little while, no matter what you see—or don’t see.”

“Why? What don’t I know?” Jess asked, her eyes narrowing.

“A few things,” I said, looking away, “but I think we should keep this on a need-to-know basis. It’ll be easier for you that way.”

“That constitutes a problem for me,” she said with a stern frown.

“Think of it this way Jess: you’ve been protecting me all your life. Well, now it’s my turn to protect you. I think I have the advantage this time.”

Jess hesitated but finally nodded.

“Oh,” I added, “and you might want to be a little more polite to the guys. I don’t know *exactly* who or what they are, but I know we want them helping us.”

“And the fact that they’re all drop dead gorgeous has nothing to do with it?” Jess asked knowingly as she arched one eyebrow at me.

“Doesn’t hurt,” I said throwing her a wicked grin. I certainly hoped Ethan had truly stayed in human time and wasn’t eavesdropping.

Jess smiled.

“Fine,” she continued, “I’ll play nice, but I’m keeping an eye on Theo. I’m not so sure about him.”

I laughed.

“There’s nothing wrong with Theo. He’s just young and, I think, new to this. Just exactly how did he get you here anyway?” Jess made a face.

“Suddenly he was just standing in the middle of the living room,” Jess said, shaking her head, her brow creased. “He just appeared out of thin air. He grabbed me, pulled me off the couch and said we had to go—didn’t even give me time to pack. I’ll need to borrow some clothes by the way. I would have called the police, but I didn’t have a chance. He yanked me out of the apartment, threw me in his car—he’s pretty strong for a kid—and then we were driving for the next five or six hours. Is he even old enough to drive?”

“I’m pretty sure he is.”

“Well, he topped off that very special experience with a cold hike through a bug-infested forest. I wasn’t in any position to argue with him—he was carrying a *sword* for crying out loud.”

Huh, I hadn’t noticed any bugs.

“Sounds like you two had a narrow escape. Theo wouldn’t have done that if he hadn’t needed to.”

“Maybe,” Jess said grudgingly.

“Come on,” I said, nudging Jess with my elbow, “let’s get something to drink. I think we’re late for our debriefing.” I stood up and waited for her to join me.

Jess stood and reluctantly followed me into the house.

Chapter 18: The Eye of the Storm

“What would you like?” Liam asked when Jess and I were seated at the kitchen island.

Okay, I'll give him this one—I'm tired.

“Just some water,” I said. Jess nodded in agreement.

“Do you want another cup of tea too? I might just join you if you do.”

“Sure,” I said, a little surprised. I didn't really need the tea, but I had never seen Liam eat or drink anything before and I was curious. I was even more curious (and surprised) when Ethan and Theo said they would have some too.

The four of us sat at the island while Liam began setting items on the counter for our impromptu tea party. He set glasses of water in front of Jess and me. I drank mine down in one go.

“So what questions did you have?” Ethan asked me when I finally set my glass down. I wondered if there was just a hint of wariness to his tone. Regardless, I pressed on with my question—or rather, the question right next to it.

“Well, mostly I was wondering exactly how we know when we've won the battle. I mean, I assume our goal is to ... *eliminate* Corbett and Delano, right?” I hesitated, not quite comfortable saying the word “kill” in relation to what we were about to do. Besides, for Jess' sake I was going for subtle here.

“Yes, that's right,” Ethan said cautiously, studying me as though he were waiting for something.

“So ... , how *exactly* can that be done? I mean, I know what Liam and Theo did that one time And I saw what happened yesterday” I still couldn't bring myself to say the words out loud. I decided not to bother. “Is that the only way?”

“I'm afraid so,” Ethan said evenly in a quiet tone. He sat on the edge of his stool, watching me like he expected me to bolt from my chair at any moment.

I took a steadying breath, frowning to myself. I didn't think I could do what they had done. I couldn't think of any circumstance in which I could—not even a battle. But then, I'd never been in a battle. “So ... , there's no way we could just convince them to leave?”

“I think it's safe to say Liam exhausted that option,” Ethan said, exchanging a glance with Liam.

“And you said people were too big to shift, so we can't just shift them into another frequency, right?” The question was directed to Liam, but it was Ethan who answered.

“That's right,” Ethan said. “That won't work. Besides, even if a person could be shifted, they would simply shift right back. That wouldn't stop them.”

“Unless you got them to *eiliff mors*,” Theo threw in off-handedly. This time it was Liam who shot Theo a cautionary look.

“That's only theoretical,” Liam said tightly, continuing to frown while he poured tea into cups. Liam's reaction caught my attention more than Theo's words had.

Now what am I not supposed to know?

Having Theo around was proving to be rather helpful.

“What’s *eiliff mors*?” I asked, meeting Ethan’s gaze directly.

Ethan and I regarded one other for a moment: his expression measuring, mine determined. He drew a deep breath then reluctantly explained.

“There’s no translation for the term. It’s another frequency—a *theoretical* frequency. Our researchers have proposed it may be possible to shift down so far that you would find yourself in a frequency where time moves infinitely slowly or possibly ceases to move at all. In that frequency there would be no energy flowing, and consequently, no movement of any kind. No light. No sound. The waves wouldn’t have enough energy to move. None of the millions of physiologic reactions required for sight, smell, sensations, or movements would take place. Our scientists speculate thought may not even be possible. There would be ... *nothingness*. If a person were caught there, they would have no way of returning because they wouldn’t be able to move energy and would not be able to shift up again.”

“Yeah,” Theo continued, oblivious to Ethan’s warning look, “so if you could get someone there, they’d be stuck there. That is, if you could shift them—which we can’t. And, even if you could, you’d be stuck there with them.” He paused considering this briefly. He made a face then, “Not so good, that part.”

“But it’s just a *theory*,” Ethan reiterated in a stern voice, finally locking eyes with Theo.

“Well, sure,” Theo finished lamely, a confused expression on his face. He turned his attention to his cup of tea.

“All right, fine,” I said. “That only leaves one way to do it. But if we can finish off Delano and Corbett, that should end this, right?”

Ethan turned to Liam to supply the answer.

“It should,” Liam said, taking his cue. “Without the leadership of Corbett and Delano, I expect the command structure of the chaeli will fall into chaos. There likely won’t be an organized plan or—better yet—there might be some internal fighting as everyone vies for the top position. Either way,” he said, turning to Ethan, “I’m certain you have men who can take care of the chaeli while they’re busy trying to sort things out?”

“That won’t be a problem,” Ethan said, taking a sip of his tea.

“You’re in charge of that many people?” I asked, feeling out of the loop. Ethan glanced at me, but quickly turned back to his tea.

“I can speak to those in charge. They’ll be told what’s happening and will give the necessary orders.” I saw Theo give Ethan a questioning look. Ethan only exchanged a brief glance with him. Theo regarded me then turned back to Ethan, but he said nothing.

Okay ... That’s it? Kill the bad guys and go home?

It seemed just a little too rudimentary—too simple—and it still felt wrong. I wondered briefly again about trying to get away and find the two chaeli on my own. I had no idea how to do that or even where to begin looking. Besides, Ethan and Liam would follow me and we’d likely wind up in a battle anyway. Aside from all that, it was also very deceptive. I didn’t know if I could do that to Ethan or to Liam. I frowned. Our compromise was likely the best I could do here. Whatever fate we were dooming ourselves to, we would face it together.

“Elly,” Ethan began warily, “what are you thinking?” I jumped guiltily and met his cerulean gaze.

“So ... , that’s the plan then?” I asked with a bit of skepticism colouring my tone.

“Yes, that’s the plan,” Ethan replied as he scrutinized my face. The plan was bad enough, but there was also something else was bothering me—the real question I was trying to ask but

didn't want to. My stomach twisted a little, and I lowered my gaze, pretending to study my tea.

"And when the chaeli are dealt with you'll go home," I said quietly. I tried to keep my voice steady and say it like a directive, but I honestly didn't know if I was telling him to go or asking him to stay. I wasn't sure how it came out. My chest tightened and suddenly it was difficult to breathe. The idea of Ethan leaving felt even more wrong than the plan to fight the chaeli. I caged the dread prowling through my chest, trying to keep my hand from shaking as I took a sip of tea. It was tepid. I hated tepid tea, but I drank it anyway, nervously aware of Jess' eyes on me.

"Yes," Ethan said evenly. "After the battle I will go home." His voice was low and tightly controlled, but the underlying edge to it made me lift my eyes to his—they were the colour of a dull winter sky. For a moment neither of us spoke and Ethan broke off the gaze, looking down at the counter in front of him. I turned away too. Theo said something about making *certain* Ethan would go home.

"I would suggest, gentlemen," Liam began, breaking the long, uncomfortable silence, "that since we will likely be expending a great deal of energy when the chaeli arrive, we should probably have something to eat tonight." Ethan turned to face Liam but didn't appear to see him. Liam watched Ethan, his brow drawing down as he waited for a response. Finally, Ethan's eyes focused on Liam's face and his chin raised a little.

"Umm ... , yes, that's a good idea," Ethan responded dully. Liam nodded as he continued to scrutinize Ethan's face.

"The lake is well stocked. I'm sure I can catch a few fish—if that's okay with everyone."

"That would be great," Theo chimed in enthusiastically.

My eyes lifted to Ethan's again, but this time it was me who looked away first. I could feel the sting of threatening tears. I tried to breathe, but it was difficult. I had to get out of there before my self-control disintegrated.

"Can I join you Liam?" I asked. I could feel the warmth of Ethan's gaze on my face, but didn't look at him. Liam cast me a surprised glance then turned to consider Ethan. Ethan only stared down at the counter top. Liam paused for a second.

"Sure," Liam finally answered quietly, averting his eyes from the scene being played out. "Would you like to come too, Jessica?"

"Fishing? We're talking slimy, wet, and cold, right? No thanks. I'll be just fine here."

"Theo?" Liam asked. Theo was watching Ethan with worry etched on his brow. He glanced up at Liam.

"No thanks," he said, turning back to watch Ethan again.

"Elly," Liam continued, "why don't you get your sweater on while I clear these dishes?"

Ethan came back to life then—sort of. He spoke but he didn't move.

"I'll take care of these," he said in a hollow tone as he studied his cup of tea. "You two go ahead."

Liam hesitated then nodded and ushered me to the door. I glanced back over my shoulder to see Ethan still sitting, not moving. He didn't look up.

Liam and I headed to the shed at the back of the cabin where Liam retrieved two fishing poles, a pail, and a tackle box before we made our way down to the dock. I had to watch my steps, trying to time them with the gentle sway as the dock lifted on the small waves.

"Have you fished before?" Liam asked, handing me one of the poles.

I took the rod hesitantly. Maybe this hadn't been such a good idea. I turned back to the cabin and saw Ethan standing like a specter in the middle of the large, dark front window. He

stood looking down at Liam and me. I directed my attention back to Liam.

“No, not really,” I said quietly. I knew I had held a pole in my hands before, but I had been so young at the time I couldn’t even remember what I had done with it.

“It’s easy,” Liam began, but my attention faltered. That little voice insistently pushed forward the idea of following Ethan when he went home. How long would I have with him if I did that? Could a person live going back and forth between time frequencies or did the process of dying pick up where it left off each time you re-entered the other frequency? And then there was the much larger question: did Ethan *want* me to go back with him? I winced.

I shook my head, drew a breath, and looked up at Liam. I saw Liam’s gaze drop from the front window of the cabin back to the rod he held in his hand. He wore a melancholy sort of frown, but forced a smile when he saw me watching him.

“Fishing is easy,” he said, starting again. “I’ll show you.” He drew the rod back over his shoulder then flicked it forward, casting his hook far out into the lake. I could barely keep up with the movement. I gave my rod a feeble flick. My hook landed with a plop and a splash only a couple of feet in front of the dock. Liam grinned.

“Reel it in and I’ll help you this time.” He set down his rod while I reeled in my hook for another go. Liam stepped behind me and placed his hand over top of mine on the rod. “Bring the rod back over your shoulder and release the hook at the peak of the arch, then follow through with the rod.” He took my arm through the motion of the swing. I felt Liam’s hand on mine—felt the quiet, soothing warmth that slowly wrapped around my arm and then my shoulder. I felt myself relax into the energy of it, letting Liam guide my hand and the fishing rod with it. The hook made much better distance this time.

“Okay, now you try,” he said, stepping back to stand beside me. I reeled in the hook and lure. I tried swinging the rod on my own and landed the hook a good distance out this time. “Excellent. I think you have it now,” Liam said, nodding approvingly.

We sat down on the end of the dock and continued to fish. I wondered if Ethan was still watching us from the cabin, but I didn’t turn around to find out. I didn’t actually want to know. Liam and I sat in silence; the only sound that of the fishing rods whirring and the waves licking at the bottom of the dock. The quiet of the lake and Liam’s still presence soothed my frayed nerves. Liam had said he came here to escape and I now understood why. Out of the corner of my eye I could see Liam glance my way occasionally with a concerned expression on his face, but he said nothing. I liked him for that.

By the end of an hour or so Liam had caught several large fish, putting them in the pail he had filled with water. He said he would prepare them for supper when we were finished. I didn’t insist on helping with that—I really didn’t want to know what needed to be done to a fish to get it ready to eat.

Surprisingly, I caught a small fish as well. It had startled me when I felt the pull on my rod and I jumped, almost dropping the fishing rod into the water. Liam chuckled as he made a quick grab for the rod and helped me reel in the fish. We decided we likely had caught enough for supper with my one small fish and Liam’s larger ones. We gathered our equipment and returned to the shed, discussing what would go with the fish.

Liam suggested I go into the cabin while he cleaned the fish. I hesitated, my mind conjuring up the image of Ethan looking down from the front window, but I wasn’t very keen on watching Liam prepare the fish either. I opted for the cabin. I opened the door to see Jess sprawled across one of the over stuffed chairs in the living room, legs hanging over the armrest and a book obscuring her face—the book that I had tossed into my backpack while packing: Sir Gawain and

the Green Knight.

Ethan and Theo were sitting on the couch together, their backs toward the door. They were bent over something, talking quietly, Ethan giving directions to Theo. Ethan heard me step in and glanced back over his shoulder at me. He gave me a weak smile.

“How was fishing?” he asked. His tone was coolly polite, but his eyes burned a brilliant jade. My heart skipped a beat as I studied him warily.

“Fine,” I responded, feeling just a little unbalanced. Ethan watched me for a fraction of a second longer than abruptly turned away. A slight panic set in, causing my heart to pick up pace. I saw Jess peer over the top of her book, glancing between Ethan and me, but she said nothing.

“How’s this?” Theo asked, holding something up for Ethan to see.

I walked over to the couch to see what they were working on. The shortsword Liam had found for me was on the coffee table in front of them. In his hands, Theo held the piece of leather Liam had given Ethan earlier. It was wrapped around some sort of object. Theo was trying to secure the leather to the object by wrapping it with thin strips of leather. Ethan inspected Theo’s work. He then proceeded to instruct Theo on how to tie off the leather strip so it wouldn’t come undone. When he had the strings tied off, Theo handed the thing back to Ethan.

“Is this right?” Theo asked. Ethan took the object from Theo and examined it. Peering over Ethan’s shoulder I finally understood what it was.

Ahhh: a sheath for the shortsword.

Ethan picked up the blade and slid it smoothly into the sheath. He pulled it out and silently slid it in again. “Perfect,” Ethan said, nodding approvingly. “That should hold together nicely. Well done,” Ethan said, smiling at Theo. Theo smiled broadly in return. “Now we just need a belt for it.”

Theo immediately unbuckled the belt in his waistband, pulled it out and slid it through some of the strips of leather. He held it up to inspect it. “There,” he announced proudly. Ethan nodded up at him. Theo reached over to hand the belted sheath and sword to me. I took it reluctantly, not entirely sure how to manage a sword sheath.

“Would you please try this on, Elly?” Theo asked. I glanced at Ethan uncertainly. His cerulean eyes were reservedly polite. In some weird trick of space and time, the distance between Ethan and me suddenly seemed much larger than the two steps it would take me to reach him. I swallowed hard. Was it panic or dread that made my stomach lurch when our eyes met? I turned back to Theo.

“Sure,” I said quietly, reaching for the sword. The sword was surprisingly heavy, and the belt and sheath felt foreign and awkward in my hands. I fumbled with the buckle and almost dropped the whole thing once. I thought I had the stay securely through one of the belt holes and let go of it, only to realize too late that it hadn’t gone through entirely. I caught it just before it fell to the floor.

Ethan sat with a studied patience as he watched me struggle with the belt. His expression was unreadable and his hands were gripped together so tightly his knuckles were turning white. It was Theo who came to my rescue after a second failed attempt to secure the belt. Stepping closer to me, he flashed Ethan a puzzled frown. Ethan only met Theo’s gaze briefly and looked away. With Theo’s help, the belt was finally buckled, but even though we had fastened it in the last hole it still hung down over my hips precariously.

“It’ll hang better over the chainmaille,” Theo assured me. “If we have to, I’ll punch a few more holes in the belt,” he said.

“Thanks Theo,” I said quietly. I glanced at Ethan, but he steadfastly kept his attention focused on the belt around my hips, one corner of his mouth turned down.

“Quite the fashion statement,” Jess interjected from over the top of her book. She gave me a dubious look. I only grinned. Theo unbuckled the belt again and went to set it on the kitchen table.

Ethan immediately stood and began tidying up the things they had been using to make the sheath. He walked away without speaking, casting me a small, polite smile as he passed—a smile that didn’t reach his eyes. I watched him as he disappeared up the stairs. I turned and exchanged glances with Jess.

Ethan re-appeared at the bottom of the stairs in a grand total of three seconds. “Theo, you and I should run a quick patrol before we eat. I don’t want anything catching us off guard.”

“Sure,” Theo said. “I’ll get my stuff.” Theo disappeared—literally—then quickly re-appeared—again, literally—with a shortsword slung across his back. I saw Jess roll her eyes and duck back down behind her book.

“We won’t be gone long,” Ethan said, turning to me. “Liam will stay with you.” He led Theo out of the cabin without waiting for a response. I stood staring at the closed door for a moment feeling as if I were in one of those fun houses where the floor slides back and forth.

“Elly?” Jess asked quietly. “What’s up with him?” she asked, jerking her chin in the direction of the closed door. I looked at Jess without seeing her.

“I have absolutely no idea,” I said. I stood, staring at Jess for a moment, my mind numb and refusing to volunteer any useful information. The only thing I could think to do was to get supper ready. I tried to focus. “Would you mind helping me move the swords from the table?” I asked her.

“Did that question just come out of your mouth? Who asks a question like that?” Jess asked, shaking her head. I laughed.

“Sorry, Jess,” I said, still smiling. “But seriously—can you help me move the swords?”

“Sure?” Jess said uncertainly. Admittedly neither of us knew what we were supposed to do with a table full of sharp weapons. Thanks to Ethan’s brief tutorial, I *did* know it was important to protect the blades so we carefully laid them out on top of the leather cloth on the living room floor.

Bizarre.

I turned my attention to the task of making supper—at least I knew what to do about that. Jess was determined to help me and since I didn’t mind the company I put her to work—cleaning potatoes—no sharp objects. I didn’t know how much the guys would eat so we aimed high in the amount we made. I cubed the potatoes and cut some carrots into the batch for good measure then sprinkled on a few spices I found in Liam’s well-stocked kitchen. We slid the pan full of potatoes into the oven to roast.

I was just about to go outside to see how Liam was doing with the fish when he stepped in the door, the smell of wood smoke and fall leaves hovering on the cold draft that followed him inside.

“I’ve got the rock heating,” he said. “Do you need any help in here?”

“No. I think we’ve got it covered. I was just about to come out to see how you were coming along. Wait. You’ve got a ‘rock heating’? I’m sorry, I’ll need a bit more to go on there.”

Don’t these guys do anything normal?

Liam smiled. "I've filleted the fish and I'll be cooking them on a rock heated in the center of the fire. It works well—very even heat."

"Oh," was about all I could do with that information. "I think I'm going to have to see this for myself." Liam chuckled and waited for me to put on my jacket then opened the door. We stepped out into the cool night air and headed to an area in back of the cabin where a brick fire pit held a blazing fire in check. How had Liam possibly managed to haul a load of bricks all the way out here?

A very large, flat rock sat across the fire pit, resting on the bricks on either end. Underneath the rock, a vibrant yellow fire stretched its flames into the air clawing at the darkness that tried to claim its light. Liam felt the rock with his hand. "It'll need a few more minutes yet."

"That's fine, we just put the potatoes in—they'll take a while too. So ... , where does one learn to cook on a rock?" Liam smiled up at me then grabbed a poker and crouched down to rearrange the logs under the rock. The flames danced higher into the night air.

"I spent some time with a tribe of native people before the Europeans came. They used to cook their fish like this—perhaps some still do, I don't know."

"You were here before the settlers came?!" I asked incredulously. Liam nodded.

"Yeah, I was here for a while before they got here." He looked up at me with a cautious expression. "I did tell you I had lived a long time."

"Right, I forget sometimes. Were you with them long?"

"I'm not sure how long—I stayed for a time. They were surprisingly accepting of my *talents*. Of course they believed I was a spirit guide. That worked in my favour—they didn't bat an eye when I shifted in front of them. Good thing too. I hadn't been shifting long and my control wasn't great then. The tribe let me stay with them and I learned their language and skills. They helped me survive one rather harsh winter as I recall. Eventually the land was discovered and so were the native people. I worked with the elders of the tribe, trying to protect them from the onslaught of the French and British. I helped the tribe stay under the radar for quite some time, but eventually the elders died and younger leaders took their place. The younger ones were more interested in the things the settlers promised them than in following the advice of an old guide." There was a heaviness in Liam's voice as he spoke.

"What happened to them?"

"I'm not entirely sure. I believe some died and the remaining people of the tribe were put on reservations. I couldn't stay. Settlers took over the area then and I had to leave. I'm pretty sure the settlers wouldn't have been quite so accepting of my unique abilities. I had to let the native people fend for themselves after a point."

"So their 'god' abandoned them to their fate?" I asked.

Liam looked up at me then, his eyes the melancholy grey of a deep fog just before dawn.

"Not even God can stop people from making their own mistakes," he said quietly.

"No," I said soberly, pulling my jacket closer around me. "I suppose we're rather intent on the mistakes we choose to make."

"You still think we should turn you in, don't you?" Liam asked, still watching me.

"Yep." This would be our mistake.

"And you still think this will end badly?"

"Yep." We would be left to face the consequences of our mistake.

"I'm sorry, Elly" Liam said with a heavy sigh, "it's the best we can do."

"I know," I said evenly. "I guess there are always reasons people choose the mistakes they do."

Suddenly Theo was standing beside me. “Hey, what’s with the rock?” I turned to see Ethan disappear around the corner of the cabin. I excused myself to help Jess while Theo stayed for a cooking lesson with Liam.

I could hear Jess talking when I stepped into the cabin. I focused on her energy and could “see” her standing in the kitchen talking to Ethan.

“I was about to see if Liam had the ingredients for me to fake up some kind of dessert,” Jess was explaining.

“Excuse me?” Ethan asked, sounding confused and in the outline of his energy I could see the way his forehead creased when he asked the question.

“I’m going to make dessert?” Jess tried to clarify, giving Ethan a curious look.

“What’s ‘dessert?’” Ethan asked.

They didn’t have dessert? Poor souls.

There was a pause before Jess answered. “You don’t know what dessert is?” she asked uncertainly. “Are you guys from some alternate universe or something?”

Uh oh. Too close to home.

I moved quickly, instantly appearing beside Jess and interrupting the conversation. Jess jumped and I heard her heartbeat pick up in tempo.

“Dessert is something sweet that we eat following our meal,” I said, answering Ethan’s question.

“Sweet. Like the ice cream?” he asked me, relief evident on his face.

“That’s one type,” I replied with a nod of my head. “But there are a lot of different types of ‘sweet.’” I moved around the island intending to distract Jess from asking more questions by starting to fix dessert.

“So what ingredients do you need?” Ethan asked as he walked over to a cupboard and pulled open the door.

“Standard baking supplies: flour, baking powder, sugar, and hopefully cocoa,” she said while casting me a quizzical look.

“What are you making Jess?” I asked.

“Pudding and sauce—I hope.”

Ethan wouldn’t have a clue about this. I decided to stick close by and run interference. The two of them began rummaging through cupboards.

“Bingo,” Jess said, coming across the supplies she needed. Ethan helped her pull out the required ingredients and set them on the cupboard. Jess set to work making a basic pudding with a sauce that cooked in with the pudding.

I moved to the cupboard and began pulling plates out to set the table. Ethan was by my side in an instant, reaching to lift the heavy stack of plates down from the shelf. Our hands accidentally collided as we both reached for the plates and the energy immediately raced up my arm. Ethan set the plates on the counter. He shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans and turned away. He just stood there like that for several moments then cleared his throat.

“I’ll go see how Liam is making out.” He was out the door before my mind registered the movement.

Jess and I exchanged glances.

“Guess I’ll set the table,” I said dejectedly. Jess shoved the pudding into the oven beside the pan of potatoes then came to help me.

The three men stepped through the door some time later, bringing with them the warm

smells of cooked fish and wood smoke. Liam was carrying a steaming plate of lightly browned fish fillets.

“I think these are done. How are things coming in here?” Liam asked, setting the fish on the table.

“Everything’s ready,” I said. I pulled both the dessert and the potatoes out of the oven. I left the pudding on the stove to cool and brought the potatoes to the table. We all took our seats and everyone began filling their plates. Everything smelled incredible. The aroma of the fish melded with the spicy aroma of the potatoes making my mouth water.

The fish tasted as good as it smelled, having a soft, smoky flavour that I could only attribute to Liam’s method of cooking. The potatoes were good if I did say so myself, with the tangy spices of the potatoes setting off the flavour of the fish. It seemed there was a lot of food on the table for only five people and I thought we might have overestimated the amount we needed, but I was to be proven wrong.

I was nearly finished the food on my plate when I looked up and noticed Ethan, Liam and Theo were already finishing off their second round of food. I blinked a couple of times. How had the three of them managed to eat everything so quickly? I studied them. They were well mannered and polite—almost formal in fact—but they were moving very *fast*. Ah—I was out of sync again. My brows drew together as I watched them, trying to figure out what frames they were in compared to me.

Note to self: make lots of food when feeding cians ... and keep your hands out of the way when they’re eating.

I peeked at Jess as she sat beside me. She had barely touched her food. Instead, she sat watching the others intently. I saw the men passing the food around and setting it back down again—quickly.

“Don’t you find that distracting?” she asked me quietly, a dumbfounded expression on her face. I glanced around not certain what I was supposed to be looking for.

“Find what distracting?” I asked finally, turning back to her.

“When they disappear like that. When the bowls disappear. And it all happens so fast.”

Oh, that.

“Sorry, Jess. No, it isn’t distracting for me—I can still see them even when you can’t.”

“You can still see them?” Jess asked dubiously. She startled and her gaze darted to Ethan.

“Sorry, Jessica,” Ethan said. “That was rude. We weren’t thinking. We’ll stay in a human frame from now on.” He exchanged glances with Theo and Liam who then turned to us.

Theo cast Jess a resentful frown, griping about hating to eat slowly, but Ethan silenced him with a sharp command that I couldn’t understand. Theo only shoved another bite of food into his mouth and stared sullenly at his plate.

A round of “thirds” effectively finished off the food.

“The fish was very good, Liam, thank you,” I offered when he had finished eating. Ethan and Theo added their appreciation as well. “I think the pudding is likely cool by now,” I said. I stood up and went to fetch it from the kitchen.

Liam followed me, collecting bowls and spoons while I retrieved the dessert. We brought it all to the table. I had a mental image of setting it down in the middle of the table and backing away quickly while the rest of them inhaled it. I had to suppress a giggle. I dished out the pudding and handed the bowls around, taking only a small piece for myself. I left the pan in the middle of the table.

“What’s this?” Theo asked, regarding his dessert curiously.

“*Dessert*,” Ethan said, studying the contents of his own bowl. “It’s sweet. They have it following a meal.”

“Try it,” I encouraged.

That was all the invitation Theo needed. He took one small bite then proceeded to finish his serving so quickly it was difficult for me to make out the movements. Obviously he hadn’t stayed strictly within a human frame despite Ethan’s directive. As I suspected, the pudding was devoured as fast as the main course had been. I sat watching as the dessert made its rounds for a second and final time. I couldn’t help but smile.

They may not eat often, but when they do ...

“That was great,” Theo said, setting his bowl down with a flourish. “Why don’t we have this at home?” he continued, turning to Ethan.

“Because you don’t have the same type of sugar that we do,” Liam volunteered.

Theo thought for a moment. “Maybe we could bring some home with us. Maybe Elly”

Ethan stood up abruptly, his chair clattering backward.

“Taking human things into cian time is *not* a good idea Theo.” His voice had a definite edge to it, and he leveled a stern look at Theo, effectively silencing him. Ethan gathered up the empty bowls and carried them to the kitchen.

Theo and Liam both turned apologetic looks on me. Jess only sat silently, staring down at the table. I frowned and turned to watch Ethan. Liam stood and started clearing the rest of the table and everyone else joined in. There wasn’t a lot left to clear, and I brought the last couple of glasses to the sink. Ethan was just running the water to wash the dishes.

“Why don’t you let me do these? It’s likely my turn,” I offered.

Ethan glanced at me then over to Liam. He turned back to me, his face distorting.

“All right,” Ethan conceded reluctantly. “You do these. I need to speak with Liam for a moment.” Everyone turned to look at Ethan. He looked at me and forced a smile, his eyes dark again. He turned to Theo. “Theo, would you dry the dishes for Elly? Liam, can I speak with you outside please?” His questions were thinly disguised directives.

Liam nodded to Ethan then cast me a questioning glance. I shrugged.

I watched as Ethan and Liam pulled on their greatcoats and stepped outside, the cool dark of the night pressing in on them. Jess looked at me, shrugged, then went to the living room where she dropped down onto the chair and picked up her (my) book. Theo and I started washing the dishes. From where I worked at the sink, I could see Ethan and Liam standing on the deck, the light from the living room filtering through the window and falling on their faces.

My attention was so focused on the scene being played out on the other side of the window that I had to remind myself to keep washing the dishes. Theo stood waiting, but I noticed he was spending more time staring out the window than drying dishes. After a moment or two we both gave up the pretext of washing dishes and stood watching Ethan and Liam.

Ethan turned to Liam and started talking. It was all I could do not to shift up and listen in on their conversation. Truth be told, I likely would have if I had been alone, but Theo kept glancing down at me. Liam listened intently to Ethan, nodding once or twice. I saw Ethan wince, look down, then rake his fingers through his hair. Liam turned his head away and stared out over the lake. Ethan only stood, silently watching Liam. Liam turned back to Ethan and spoke. Then it was Ethan who looked away. I saw Ethan square his shoulders and look back up to Liam. A pained expression swept across Ethan’s face and he had to turn away from Liam again. After a moment Liam nodded his head and appeared to be speaking again. They stood, measuring one

another for several moments before Ethan and Liam exchanged a brief grasp of wrists. They spoke for a moment more before Ethan shrugged his shoulders and shook his head. He strode into the cabin with Liam following.

I hurried to pick up a bowl and start washing it. Even Theo knew to turn his attention back to the dishes. However, neither of us could keep from glancing up at Ethan as he came through the door. Ethan met my questioning gaze with a studied smile as he came to stand behind Theo.

“I’ll take over, Theo,” Ethan said quietly, reaching for the dishtowel. Theo hesitated, scrutinizing Ethan’s face for a moment before he tossed his tea towel onto the cupboard then moved off into the living room. Liam came into the kitchen. He studied me with an uneasy expression, looked over at Ethan then flicked his gaze back to me. One corner of his mouth turned down, and he left for the living room where he sat down rather heavily on the couch.

Ethan picked up the dishtowel and we stood together finishing the dishes. Every now and then our hands would touch as I handed him a dish and each time that now-familiar shock would course through my hand. I didn’t even jump at it anymore. I glanced up at Ethan several times as we silently worked. Only once did his eyes drift to mine—and he kept that contact brief.

I turned my attention to Liam and Theo as they sat on the couch. Liam had taken out a guitar and was strumming chords on it while Theo watched. I kept my eyes on my dishes as I tried to get Ethan talking. Speaking quietly I said, “You seemed upset when you were talking to Liam. Are you worried about the chaeli coming?” I didn’t look at him—I only studied the fork in my hand as I washed it for the third time.

“No,” Ethan said evenly, “I’m not overly concerned, although there are some unknowns to navigate. Like I’ve mentioned, no cian has ever dealt directly with the two leaders before.” He grinned down at me. I inhaled sharply at the tingle that ran down my spine. It seemed like a very long time since I had seen a genuine smile on Ethan’s face. “You appear to be turning everything on its head,” he finished. He sobered then. “I’d really like to know why they fear you so much. It must be something important for them to go to these lengths to reach you.”

“Do we know when they’ll get here?”

How much time do we have left together?

“The nearest we can estimate is some time tomorrow afternoon at the earliest. It’ll take them that long to get information and people where they need to be even if they know exactly where we are.”

My stomach seized as I thought about the battle—actually being in it, I mean. Now that I thought about it, I could feel a nervousness that hadn’t been there before. Standing off to the side and watching a battle was one thing—I only had to stay out of the way, but Ethan, Liam and Theo would be the ones putting their lives on the line—for me. I frowned and my brow creased as I looked back down to the dish I was washing. Ethan ducked his head trying to catch my eye and I let him. His eyes were a very true blue at that moment.

“You don’t need to worry about tomorrow Elly,” he said. “You won’t have to do anything aside from keeping very close to me.”

“What if I’m not worried about me?”

Ethan’s eyes turned a sea green as our gaze held.

“You don’t need to worry about us either,” he assured me. “We can take care of ourselves. We’ll be fine.”

“Even Theo?” I asked in a whisper, turning to consider Theo as he sat beside Liam. Theo was smiling and watching as Liam continued playing his guitar softly. Ethan glanced over at him too.

“If I didn’t think Theo could handle himself well in a battle, I would send him home. He’s seen battles before. The truth is he’s remarkably good at this type of thing and will be a useful addition to our team. I would never tell him this, but one day he’ll be better than I am. For now, I’m trying to keep him from getting cocky and doing something stupid.”

“Then that’s not what had you upset earlier?” I said, lifting my eyes to his and handing him the last cup for drying. He met my gaze with his own calculating one before he took the cup.

“No,” he admitted quietly, turning his attention to the cup and continuing to dry it long after every molecule of water was wiped away.

“Then what?” My voice was barely above a whisper.

Ethan scowled as he turned away. Maybe I didn’t want to know. Ethan stood silently for a moment or two. By the time he turned back to me he had affixed a well-controlled expression on his face and spoke in a tone that matched it.

“Elly, this just isn’t something I’m prepared to discuss with you. I’ve spoken with Liam about the issue and we feel we have it sufficiently sorted.”

“Issue?” I asked, arching an eyebrow at him.

“Forfeit the game now, Elly, I’m not playing.”

Darn it!

He was definitely getting better at this. Ethan hung up the towel and studied me for a moment, his features softening.

“Why don’t we join the others?” he suggested quietly. “They look like they’re having fun.”

I glanced over at them.

“Yeah,” I said, glancing over at them, “but shouldn’t we be sharpening swords or setting up battlements or something? Bad guys are coming, remember?”

Ethan smiled an amused smile.

“I haven’t forgotten—and the swords are sharpened,” Ethan replied. “Liam is doing the right thing. He’s obviously seen battles before. There’s nothing we can do right now but wait through a very long night for the battle to start. Waiting is not our friend at the moment. It gives people time to think and time to get nervous. Nervous people become frightened, and frightened people panic. We need everyone thinking clearly tomorrow. Liam’s offering a distraction—keeping everyone from getting frightened.”

Now how clever was that?

“Come,” Ethan said simply as he ushered me over to where the others sat. Jess pulled her nose out of her book when she saw us rejoining the group. I sat down on the couch with Liam and Theo. Ethan sat on one of the large chairs.

“Hey Ethan,” Theo said, his eyes bright and Liam’s guitar in his hands. “Liam taught me something new. Listen.” He strummed a slow and delicate tune on the guitar, his fingers nimbly strumming the strings. The melody picked its way in and out of minor chords whispering of tragedy, pain, and perhaps worst of all, resignation. I sat mesmerized as the notes drifted in the air for the briefest of moments before falling away. Other notes rose up in their place, only to fade away themselves. Theo’s playing was quite good, and he allowed the story in the music to lead the song until the final note closed in on itself.

“That was amazing, Theo,” I said.

“Thanks, but I can’t take credit for that one. Liam wrote it.”

“Really?” I asked, turning to Liam for confirmation. Liam nodded. “That’s incredible. Are there words to it?”

“There are ... ,” Liam hedged. “But it’s a sad song. Why don’t we have a happier one instead?” Liam reached over to take the guitar from Theo and began to pick out a quick-paced tune with a Celtic lilt to it. I could almost hear the bodhrán beating in the background, keeping time with the cadence of Liam’s booted foot.

“Where did that one come from?” I asked when the song was finished.

“I learned that from the kitchen hands one winter when I hired on as an ostler for a Scottish lord.”

I have to say, that threw me for just a moment. I put the statement in context and looked over to see what Jess was making of it. She sat staring at Liam for a moment then turned to raise a brow at me.

“Liam’s been around a while,” I said weakly.

“Yeah. Caught that. Thanks,” Jess said acerbically.

I tried to suppress a grin.

“You may not want to know all the gory details,” I suggested.

“Probably best if I don’t,” she nodded in agreement. I turned back to Liam. “How did you learn it?” I asked.

“The servants were allowed a proper meal and a half-day of rest on Sundays. We amused ourselves with music and even dancing occasionally.

“Sounds fun,” Theo offered.

Liam shook his head.

“Not really,” Liam admitted. “The Lord of the manor was a small, cruel man. I didn’t stay long.”

“Still,” Theo said, considering, “the dancing part would have been fun. Would I know any of the steps?”

“I doubt it,” Liam replied. “They were quite different from cian dances—at least from what I know of cian dances.”

“What type of dances do you have in cian time, Theo?” I asked. “Are they the same as human dances?” Theo only looked to Ethan and I followed his gaze.

“Are they the same, Ethan?” Theo asked, a puzzled expression on his face. Ethan studied me for a second or two before answering.

“No,” he finally responded. “They’re not the same steps as in human dances, although some are similar.”

Theo’s face brightened as he turned to me and said, “I could show you if Ethan will play a song for us.”

I immediately turned to Ethan.

“You play?” I asked, brow raised. He inclined his head then reached for the guitar. I smiled.

“All right,” I said to Theo. Ethan took the guitar and strummed it a few times, testing it. He deftly picked out an intricate and quick melody similar to what you might hear in human jazz music.

I’m not certain what it was, but something about Ethan’s hands held my attention. Maybe it was the smooth way his fingers caressed the strings—as though the movement itself *was* the music. Maybe it was the strength and control I saw in his hands as they moved in time with the melody. It might have been those things, but I think it was more likely the vague notion of compassion that came to life as I watched him play. His fingers didn’t force the strings to obey, although they certainly could have. Instead, they gently coaxed the strings into lush music. I

was mesmerized.

“You play so well,” I said, still watching his hands closely.

“Thank you,” Ethan replied quietly, keeping his attention on the guitar. Theo jumped up and came to stand in front of me. He extended a hand to me and led me to the open area of the living room.

“Okay, just follow me,” Theo said, then started up in a quick step. It didn’t take me long to figure it out. It had some components of a swing step and turned on the spot like a jive step. After I got the basic steps Theo introduced a turn. I was able to fake my way through that, but when he tried to lead me through a double turn, I lost my balance and stumbled into him. He helped me right myself as we both laughed. Ethan continued to play, so Theo and I tried the steps and the turns again. This time I was ready for the double turn and he led me through it more steadily. The song ended and so did our dance.

“Well done,” Theo commented. “You catch on fast.”

“Elly taught dance last term,” Ethan offered. “She’s rather good,” he added. I stared at him in stunned silence. He was watching me with intense, green eyes the colour of leaves in summer. My stomach tightened and I took a half step back. My heart skipped a beat then stuttered back into rhythm between my quick, shallow breaths. Ethan broke off the gaze and turned his attention back to the guitar.

“And exactly how do you know that?” I asked when I could breathe again. I raised one eyebrow and inclined my head toward him. I tried to impart some severity to my words, but apparently I didn’t succeed. Ethan grinned up at me, the intense light in his eyes replaced by a cooler amusement. “You were watching me at the studio,” I accused.

“Frequently,” he admitted unashamedly. He continued to grin at me.

“But I haven’t taught that class since winter term.” That had been over four months ago. “You’ve been here that long?”

“Yes,” he replied, turning his attention to the guitar as he continued to pick out a slow tune. I didn’t know what to do with that bit of information. I only stood, glancing between Ethan who was studiously ignoring me and Liam who was watching me with a wary expression.

“All right,” Theo said, looking at Ethan, “you’re probably the best dancer of cian dances. If Elly’s that good, why don’t you try teaching her one of our more difficult dances—the one I can’t do? I want to see how she does.”

Ethan considered me for a long moment, his eyes turning a dark velvet green. I held my breath. I wanted so very much to dance with him. No, that wasn’t quite right. I mean, I certainly *did* want to dance with him, but more than that, I wanted *him* to *want* to dance with *me*. I waited, our eyes locked as we measured one another. My heart sped and I found it difficult to draw a breath.

Please say yes. Please say yes.

A sad smile turned up one corner of Ethan’s mouth. He shook his head.

“No thank you, I’ll stick to playing the guitar,” he said, giving me a one last glance before turning his attention back to the instrument.

Oh, no. He’s not getting off that easily.

“Afraid I’ll be better than you?” I taunted childishly. “Afraid you couldn’t keep up?”

Ethan only chuckled, not even bothering to look up.

“You’re doing it again,” he said quietly, a sad sort of smile toying with the edges of his mouth as he picked at the strings on the guitar.

Yep, definitely getting better at that.

“Fine,” Theo said with a slight tone of resignation. Turning to Liam he asked, “Do you dance, Liam?”

“I know most of the human dances, but not the cian ones.”

“Would you and Elly show me a human dance then?” Theo requested.

Liam looked over at me and threw a quick glance at Ethan. Ethan kept his head bent over the guitar, continuing to play a slow, winding melody. Liam turned back to Theo and then looked over at me again.

“I suppose one dance wouldn’t hurt,” he said.

“Great,” Theo said enthusiastically.

“Ethan, can you just keep playing that tune, please?” Liam requested. Ethan nodded without looking up and the song began again.

Liam stood up and crossed the room to stand in front of me. He held one hand behind his back and offered me the other, bowing ever so slightly. “May I?” he asked politely. I smiled at him. He looked like a character in a television period piece.

Oh, wait—that’s exactly what he is.

“Of course,” I replied, mirroring his formality as I inclined my head to him.

We took up a proper dance position. I could feel the strength in his arms as he held his frame and I relaxed into it. “We’ll just show Theo the basics,” Liam said. He led me through the steps of the Fox Trot, throwing in only one or two turns and promenades. One of the steps was slightly different from the one I knew, but with Liam’s strong and adept lead, I followed through well enough. I smiled up at Liam, feeling a little guilty, savouring the warmth of Liam’s hand in mine and the comforting security of his arm around my waist as we moved together through the dance. The song ended and Liam released me, but held onto my hand as he bowed to me.

“Thank you for the dance,” he said courteously.

I inclined my head. “My pleasure.” We smiled at each other before Liam dropped my hand. I thought that—for just a split second—a mournful cloud darkened Liam’s eyes, but by the time I registered the idea and turned back to him, the cloud had passed.

“Would you like to dance?” Liam asked Jess politely.

Jess looked up in surprise.

“Me?! No thanks,” she said shaking her head emphatically. “Elly and I have an agreement. She doesn’t bake brownies and I don’t dance. No one gets hurt.”

Theo laughed as he stepped up to me.

“Will you teach me that dance, Elly?” he asked. For just a moment he reminded me of the students in my class—eager to learn and willing to try anything.

“All right,” I said. I glanced over at Ethan to see if he would begin playing again. His jaw was tense and he had set the guitar down, leaning it against the couch. He was obviously done playing. I turned to Liam. “Liam, would you play something for us?”

“Sure.” Liam and Ethan regarded one another for a moment as Liam picked up the guitar and began to play. I gave Theo a few brief instructions and took position with him. He proved a quick study. He was able to pick up the steps easily and was leading fairly well by the end of the song.

“Well done Theo,” I said to him. I looked over to find Ethan watching me intently again. I smiled over at him as I went to sit down starting to feel the weight of my eventful day.

“Thanks, Elly. That was fun,” Theo said. “Human dances aren’t so different from ours. Did Mother ever teach you any human dances Ethan?” Theo asked, his expression sobering.

Ethan gave Theo a sharp glance, but his tone was cautious when he spoke. “No Theo, she didn’t. I was still quite young when she died.” He watched Theo warily.

“Your mother knew human dances?” I asked Theo.

“Of course,” Theo began “She”

“Theo!” Ethan said, standing up abruptly. “I think it’s time for you to get Timothy.”

“Oh, right,” Theo said, jumping up and moving to get his coat. I watched as he disappeared out the door (yes—literally). Liam stood up then too.

“I should get to work on that maille shirt if I’m going to have it shortened by morning.” He stood up and picked up the maille shirt from its place on the back of a chair.

“Jessica,” he said, drawing Jess’s attention. “Let me get you settled upstairs before I get to work.” Jess immediately got up and followed Liam upstairs.

I checked my watch: 22:00. I yawned.

“You should get some sleep,” Ethan said quietly.

I studied him, hesitating, reluctant to give up this time together. When I didn’t move Ethan added, “You’ll need to be well rested for tomorrow.”

Right—the battle, but worse than that, Ethan going home. My throat tightened and tears stung my eyes. I didn’t dare turn to look at him. I ducked my head and made my way to the stairs. Ethan stood silently watching me as I passed.

When I reached the foot of the stairs Ethan spoke quietly from across the room. “Good night, Elly.”

I paused, one hand on the railing and one foot on the first step. I didn’t turn around.

“Good night,” I said, my voice barely audible. I couldn’t be certain he had heard me and I couldn’t bear to repeat it. I forced my reluctant feet up the stairs.

My bedroom was dim, but I didn’t turn on the light. Instead I just shifted up a frame or two. I shut the door behind me and went through the motions of getting ready for bed. I slid under the heavy quilt willing my body to relax. It was only then that I noticed the solitary tear running down my cheek. I wiped it away, but more came. I rolled onto my side and let the tears flow. I tried to keep quiet, listening.

Although I didn’t dare admit it to myself, I knew what I was listening for: footsteps—Ethan’s footsteps—coming to my room. Instead, I heard the outside door open and close followed by the fading sound of heavy steps retreating into the night.

Chapter 19: The Last Night

The smothering darkness pressed in against me, wrapping around my chest like a boa constrictor and squeezing out any breath I managed to pull in as I struggled against the inky cloak. It encircled me, pressing in on my arms and legs too. I tried to move—tried to free myself of the suffocating stillness as the black nothingness covered my face, closing my eyes to sight and my mouth to speech. It felt like being shrink wrapped in a black plastic bag.

I willed my body to fight against it—commanded my muscles to move. Nothing happened. There was no sound or light. There was only blackness—blackness and fear. I would have panicked, but to do that, a heart has to beat quickly and breathing has to come fast, and since I could do neither, I wasn't really certain if my current state could be termed "panic"—and yet it was all the same.

Like a scurrying that's felt but not seen, something moved past me in the inky stillness, and I knew I was not alone. The shadowy thing lurked beside me, waiting, pressing closer and stealing my breath. Suddenly I knew what it was that stalked me in the darkness: dread. The same dread that had coiled inside my chest now surrounded me in the blackness, taunting me as it brushed past my arm, only to move off and return again. I tried to get away from the darkness and the evil it contained, but I couldn't.

Then I heard Ethan's voice calling my name, ever so faintly, as though in an echo. I heard it again, louder now, and this time I could feel his hand on mine. No, that's not right. I couldn't feel his *hand*, but I could feel that well-known energy starting where his hand ought to be on mine. I waited as the energy spread up my arm, urging it on toward my heart. Unlike the other times, it moved so very slowly now. Finally it reached my neck, spreading lower to my chest.

I broke free of the strangling darkness all at once. I heard myself gasp and felt movement again. I breathed in a deep draught of air, gratefully feeling the movement of my ribs and the air flowing into my lungs. I took another breath and my eyes flew open. Ethan sat, perched on the side of my bed, staring down at me.

"Ethan," I breathed.

I felt the dread twist violently in my chest and I sat bolt upright, impulsively flinging my arms around Ethan's waist and pressing my cheek tightly to his chest. I felt him jerk back and stiffen, but I didn't let go. I knew with a great deal of certainty that if I let go of him, I would fall back into the paralyzing blackness. I sat in the pitch black of the night, clinging to Ethan as though he were my own personal life preserver in a black sea that threatened to pull me under.

Ethan reached behind him and tried to unlock my arms from around his waist, but I pleaded with him: "No, please don't. Don't let me fall. I'll be lost again." I tried to breathe, fighting the panic running through me at the thought of the cloying black dread skulking in the shadows.

I felt Ethan take a deep breath. His rigid body relaxed against mine then, and I felt his arms close around me, one hand moving to hold my head against his chest. He leaned his head down and rested his cheek on the top of my head. I sank into him.

He's here. I'm safe.

For now, I was protected from the horror that stalked me in the midnight depths.

“It’s all right, I’ve got you,” Ethan whispered. He held me for several long moments, neither of us speaking. I sat, my head against his chest, listening to the slow, reassuring rhythm of his heart. I closed my eyes, drifting along on the rhythm and letting it erase the fear and panic of the dream.

We sat like that for a long while, the dream slowly fading. After a time, Ethan unwrapped my arms from around his waist and this time I let him. He slid back from me on the bed and scrutinized my face.

“Better?” he asked.

“Better,” I nodded.

“What happened?”

“I’m not exactly sure,” I said, my brow creasing as I tried to make sense of the dream—it had felt so very real. “I mean, I had that same dream again—at least I think it was a dream. I was lost in the blackness. I couldn’t move or speak. Only this time the dread—the same one that keeps me up nights sometimes—seemed to be crawling around in the darkness. I tried to get away, but I couldn’t move. I only found my way out when I heard you calling me and even then it felt like I’d be pulled back in—like quicksand or something. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have made you ... I’m sorry,” I finished feebly, unable to meet his gaze.

“It’s fine. You needn’t apologize. I’m sorry you were frightened. Are you all right now?”

“Mostly. I think.”

“Then I’ll let you get back to sleep.” Ethan moved to stand up, but I caught his arm, pulling him back down. He glanced down at my hand on his arm and looked down at me questioningly. Not holding me was one thing, but leaving me alone was quite another. Ethan continued to study me, his brow furrowed.

“Would you ... Could you just stay and talk to me for a while? If I try to go back to sleep now I’m afraid I’ll fall right back into that dream.”

Ethan hesitated, then nodded and said, “All right.” He stood up and crossed the room returning with a chair. He placed the chair a safe distance away from the bed—like he was afraid I’d grab him again—and sat down, watching me. I lay down on my side, careful not to take my eyes from his face. He smiled down at me.

“Where are the others?” I asked quietly.

“They’re getting some sleep. Tomorrow will likely be a busy day. I thought they should rest.”

“What about you?”

“I slept last night, remember? I’ll be fine.”

I lay there watching him as a million questions about tomorrow drifted into my mind. I wasn’t coherent enough to put any of them into actual words, so the questions simply drifted away again. I knew the important answers already anyway. No matter how the battle went tomorrow, I knew how the day would end: everyone would leave me—including Ethan. I blinked and my eyelids felt heavy when I tried to open them again.

“Close your eyes, Elly. You need to sleep.” Ethan’s voice was low and soothing, and I could no longer fight my heavy eyelids.

“Don’t go yet,” I mumbled as my eyes fell shut. It felt so good to stop struggling against the pull of them.

“I’ll stay until you’re asleep.” I felt Ethan brush a strand of my hair from my face. For a time I wasn’t aware of anything else.

Unfortunately, the reassurance of Ethan's presence didn't stay long and another sensation crept into my sleep. I knew this sensation. It was disturbingly familiar. It was the same dread and worry that had haunted me for the past weeks. I was only grateful it didn't lure me back into the paralyzing blackness.

Images of Ethan, Liam, and Theo drifted in and out of my mind mixed with unfamiliar and distorted faces—the kind you'd see in a monster movie. I surfaced from the fear and darkness several times only to sink, exhausted, back into the oblivion of sleep for a short time.

At some point in the night I woke and turned to find Ethan's chair empty. I groaned inwardly and rolled over, drifting off into another round of fitful sleep. This time the monsters raged, and I felt as if they were pulling me back into my black nightmare. I sat up, trying to keep myself from falling again. I looked out the window. The sky was just beginning to lighten. I glanced at my watch: seven o'clock. The dread lingered, its hot breath licking at the back of my neck and I shivered.

It's wrong. Our plan is wrong.

Ethan should have listened to me when I asked him to turn me in. We shouldn't be planning to battle these creatures.

My brain threw up a cloud of vague ideas, half hidden in the fog of fear: maybe I could run away and turn myself over to the chaeli; maybe I could surrender before any fighting broke out; maybe I could simply run and hide. Each idea rose up from the fog of vague uncertainties only to be quickly devoured by the prowling fear and dread. I knew why: it was already too late. The chaeli intended to kill us all now. We were trapped by the choices—the mistakes—we had already made.

But hope is resilient and a difficult thing to kill entirely. Like blue ink on a white shirt it tends to permeate every fibre of one's being, and no matter how many times it's dunked in scalding bleach water, it remains. Sometimes it fades a little, and sometimes the stain gets smaller, but it's never entirely gone. Over the months that followed this day I would often wonder if that were a good thing.

Maybe—just maybe—I was wrong. Maybe we could defeat them yet. Regardless, there seemed no option now but to fight. I threw off the covers and headed for the washroom. I washed up then went to sort through my meager collection of clothing to find something suitable for the day ahead. I had a bit of trouble with that. What on earth did one wear to a battle?

Another bizarre question.

I pulled out my sturdiest pair of jeans and a brown long-sleeved t-shirt I thought might work under a chainmaille shirt. I wondered if it might be better if I added my bunnyhug for another layer. Was a person allowed to wear a bunnyhug under chainmaille? Probably not—the hood would be a battle hazard. I tossed it back over the foot of the bed. I considered the sneakers on my feet. Likely not the best thing to wear into battle: no protection from things like axes or swords. Unfortunately I had nothing else with me. I tried to shove aside the foreboding that worried at the edges of my thoughts as I hurried downstairs.

I almost stumbled down the last couple of steps in my rush to escape my anxiety. I grabbed onto the railing to right myself and somehow reached the bottom of the stairs squarely on my feet. I surveyed the main floor and saw Theo stacking wood in the rack beside the fireplace. Disappointment settled heavily on my shoulders when I realized no one else was around.

“Good morning,” Theo said, setting down the last of the logs and turning to look at me. He took off his jacket and tossed it over the end of the couch.

“Morning Theo,” I said in as bright a tone as I could muster. “Where is everyone?”

Where is Ethan?

“Your sister’s still asleep I think. Ethan sent Liam on a scouting run. It’s my turn next. One of us will be keeping watch until they arrive—might be any time now. Ethan is filling Timothy in on what’s been happening and giving him his assignment. They’re trying to find a place to stage the fight. Ethan wants to put us at any advantage he can.” I simply couldn’t come up with a response that seemed appropriate.

“Oh,” was all I had.

“Let me help you with some breakfast,” Theo offered.

Ugh.

My stomach was so tied in knots I felt sick. “I’m not really interested in breakfast Theo. Thanks anyway.”

“Ethan thought you would say that,” Theo said, one side of his face scrunching up in chagrin. “I’m sort of under orders. I’m supposed to make certain you eat. I’ll hear about it if you don’t.”

Oh brother.

I felt a sharp cramp of guilt. I certainly didn’t want Theo getting into trouble. I had caused everyone more than enough of that. “Fine,” I huffed. “I’ll get myself some juice and toast, but that’s it.”

“Thanks Elly,” Theo said with a grateful smile.

“No problem Theo.” I went to the kitchen and began pulling out bread and juice. Theo was suddenly there, taking down a glass and handing me a bread knife. “Thanks,” I said taking in Theo’s permanent half-smile and bright hazel eyes—a sharp contrast to my gloomy disposition. “You’re in a good mood this morning. Aren’t you even a little concerned about today?” I have to admit that however incongruous Theo’s mood was, it soothed my frayed nerves and let me breathe a little easier. I grabbed my toast from the toaster, threw some margarine on it and sat down at the island to eat. Theo set a glass of juice down in front of me and sat down across the island from me.

“The fight? No, that’ll be great,” Theo said excitedly. I raised one eyebrow and looked at him skeptically. “Well, I don’t get to be in on these things a lot. Mostly I’m ordered to the back lines to protect the archers, but this time I’ll be right in the middle of it.” He sat grinning at me. What was I supposed to say to that? ‘Congratulations’? I wasn’t so optimistic.

“You’re not worried about getting out of this thing in one piece?”

“We’re only fighting chaeli,” Theo responded dismissively.

His confidence did little to assuage the foreboding that plagued me. If I knew with any certainty that Ethan would come out of this all right, whatever else I may have to face might not trouble me quite so much. A thought occurred to me then.

“Theo, could I ask a favour of you?”

“Maybe. As long as it doesn’t go against my orders, sure.”

“Could you promise me that, no matter what happens, you’ll take Ethan home at the end of the battle? I don’t think he should stay here any longer.”

Theo studied me for a moment as he processed my request. Finally, he nodded. “Sure, I can do that.” His face was solemn and his eyes earnest.

“Thank you, Theo,” I said, leaning across the island and extending my hand to shake on the

deal. He reached across the counter for my hand and grasped my wrist. I closed my hand around his wrist. Theo nodded once then let go.

Okay, that made this entire thing more bearable.

I still wonder what I would have done if I had known my deal with Theo would come back to bite me.

The door opened just then, and Theo and I jumped apart guiltily, both of us quickly sitting back down. We turned to see Ethan step in the open door, Timothy (I assumed, although I likely wouldn't have remembered him in any other setting) close behind him. Ethan gave Theo and me a curious glance, his eyes narrowing.

"Good morning Elly. What are you up to?" he asked suspiciously.

How did he catch that?

"Me?" I asked innocently, raising my eyebrows. "I'm eating breakfast *like you ordered*." I allowed censure to fill my tone and leveled a glare at him.

Timothy took a quick step forward, moving to stand slightly in front of Ethan.

"*Siaqui i'ae Thane einic seh I' chi cun na!*" he said angrily, giving me a disapproving scowl. I jumped back in my seat. Ethan immediately clamped his hand on Timothy's shoulder, drawing him back a step as he moved out from behind him. Timothy turned to Ethan, and Ethan silently shook his head. Timothy hesitated, cast me a wary glance then silently stepped to the side.

"Is she giving you any grief, Theo?" Ethan asked, grinning at me.

"Heaps," Theo chuckled, then smiled at me and winked. I had to laugh. I was really beginning to like Theo. My toast stuck in my throat when I realized it wouldn't just be Ethan leaving at the end of the day. I washed the toast down with the rest of my juice before crossing the kitchen to rinse my glass. When I turned around, Ethan was behind me, leaning against the counter, his arms folded across his chest. I looked up into his blue-green eyes.

"You look tired. You had a rough night." It was a statement, not a question. I wondered how much of it he had been witness to.

"Yeah," I nodded. "I told you before: I don't sleep well when something is about to go wrong."

"Something is about to go wrong?" Ethan lifted his chin slightly as his eyes darkened a shade.

"I did tell you to turn me in," I said quietly. I decided there was no sense getting upset with him all over again—we had already been through this. I knew how difficult it was for people to understand this ... this ... whatever it was that I did. Heck, even I didn't understand it and I was living in my head. Besides, it was too late now anyway. "I'm afraid today will not go well for us."

"I don't anticipate difficulty handling two chaeli with the three of us there." He studied me, waiting for my response.

"*Four* of us," I corrected.

His mouth tightened, but he surprised me by inclining his head toward me and saying, "*Four*. There shouldn't be a problem with the *four* of us there."

"Regardless," I shrugged, "this thing often doesn't make any sense, but it's never wrong."

Ethan sighed heavily. He looked down at the floor for a moment then back up at me.

"All right then," he said, "what do we need to do to fix this?" I had just opened my mouth to speak when he continued, "*besides* handing you over to the chaeli?"

I shut my mouth and frowned at him in irritation.

“I think it’s too late to fix this,” I said shaking my head. “No matter what plan I come up with, nothing takes away the dread. I think we’ll have to manage the best we can at this point.”

“Are you certain it’s not . . . ,” Ethan hesitated then proceeded cautiously like he was navigating a minefield. “. . . something *else* that’s bothering you?” he asked, casting me a concerned glance.

I flinched. It was my turn to look away from his gaze.

I thought about it as objectively as I could under the circumstances. *Was* it my fear of losing Ethan that had every nerve in my body feeling like it had been rubbed raw? I shook my head.

“No,” I said finally, “the two things feel different.” My eyes lifted to meet his. “I can feel fear *and* dread.” And, to be honest, I had no idea which one went with which reason.

An expression I took for pain crossed Ethan’s face. His brow creased and he looked down. “I’m sorry Elly. I don’t know what to do about this,” he said, lifting his dark and troubled eyes back up to mine.

“There’s no point beating yourself up about it now. Just do your best. I trust you. Who knows, maybe I’ll be wrong this time or maybe we can change something yet.” I wasn’t, and we couldn’t. I knew that. I think Ethan knew that too. He only nodded, a worried frown capturing his mouth.

“You know I’ll do everything in my power to make this work,” he said quietly.

“I know,” I said, nodding. I attempted a smile, but it likely wasn’t very convincing—even I couldn’t feel it. The thing was, Ethan couldn’t help me with what I feared most. Sword-wielding chaeli intent on killing me I could deal with, but watching Ethan leave—that was another matter entirely. In an odd way, his leaving made the idea of a battle a lot less scary. I mean, next to losing someone I cared about, a life and death battle with chaeli became just one more thing on my “to do” list.

Ethan looked me up and down. He frowned when he got to my shoes.

“We should get you ready. They could be here any time now.” He shrugged away from the counter and placed a hand on my back, ushering me toward the kitchen table. The chainmaille shirt and shortsword lay on the table, Theo’s belt looped underneath it. There was a bundle of leather folded off to the side (I didn’t even hazard a guess). Theo got to the table before we did.

“Liam and I shortened the shirt for you,” Theo said eagerly. “We also made it narrower. It should fit better.”

“Thank you Theo. It looks like a job well done. I’m certain it will be good to have in the battle.” I noticed a smile hover over one corner of Ethan’s mouth when he glanced my way.

“You’re welcome,” Theo said. “Here, try the sword. The sheath Ethan helped me with works pretty well. It pulls out smoothly.” He pulled the blade out of its sheath, paused for illustration purposes, then shoved the sword back in. He handed me the sheath. I took the weapon in both hands and drew out the blade. It really did pull out without a rub or hesitation of any kind. I studied the sheath for a moment. “What did you wrap the leather around Theo?”

“You don’t know what a sheath’s made of?” Theo asked, his brow creased.

“Nope. I’m pretty sure I missed that class,” I admitted. Ethan grinned but I ignored him.

“Huh?” Theo asked.

“Never mind,” I said, shaking my head. “What’s it made of, Theo?”

“Well, a sheath starts with a wood casing. That’s what the blade sits in. We wrap it with leather to hold the two pieces of the casing together. If it were made only of leather the blade would slice through it the first time you pulled it out.”

Huh. Who knew?

I really ought to attend that class sometime.

“Clever,” I said, nodding my head, studying the sheath more closely. “Well done.”

“We tried to give you a lighter sword. I wasn’t certain what weight you could manage. The women at home don’t work with them much, but Ethan thought you could handle this blade.”

“It seems fine, but why don’t the women use swords very much?” I asked.

“Well,” Theo began, “Mostly—at least in our line—more men can shift than women. Most of the women wouldn’t stand a chance with a sword if they went up against someone who could shift. It’d be like Jessica taking on a chaeli.”

I made a face at the picture that created.

I stepped back and swung the blade. It was heavy in my hand. I looked at it as I shifted it a frame or two. I didn’t miss the surprised expression on Timothy’s face. I liked that. The sword became lighter and I tested the swing again. Much better. “This will be perfect, Theo. Thanks.” Theo smiled broadly at me and I smiled back at him.

Ethan reached over and picked up the folded piece of leather. He unfolded it and held it up. It looked like a double-layered rectangle. I slid the sword back into the sheath and handed it to Theo. I cast Ethan a questioning frown.

“I really don’t want to ask—you’ll probably laugh at me—but ... what am I supposed to do with this?”

Ethan only suppressed a smile. It was Theo who laughed at me. He stifled the laugh when Ethan shot him a cautionary glance. Ethan turned his attention back to me. “It goes on under the chainmaille,” he explained. “It helps to keep the maille from rubbing. Besides, the links in the shirt aren’t very clean. If you wear it long enough they’ll turn your clothes black.” He threw me a grin. “Ask me how I know.” I laughed just a little.

I allowed Ethan to help me slip on the leather vest. It was long and shapeless, but would likely do the job. Not likely to appear on a fashion runway, however. I grinned as I pictured a skinny blonde teen parading down a runway in a belted leather rectangle.

Could happen.

Ethan started to help me into the maille shirt and I was forced to rein in my wandering attention. I did what I could to participate, but in the end he did all the work of getting me into the shirt, including doing up the leather ties at the side. I was surprised at the fit: it was heavy, but not too bulky and it moved easily. My eyebrows rose as I looked down at the shirt. “This fits well. Very nice Theo.”

Theo smiled.

“Actually Liam did most of that part.” Theo picked up the belted sword and came to wrap it around me. He secured the belt around my waist letting the sword hang down my left hip—it did fit better over the chainmaille. Theo stood back to inspect his work. “Perfect. I got the extra belt hole in just the right place.”

“Thank you for the use of your belt and all of your hard work, Theo,” I said, although a simple “thank you” didn’t quite seem adequate for everything he had done. I glanced up at Theo when he didn’t answer right away. A faint pink tone coloured his cheeks as he studied me for a moment.

“It was nothing,” he said, turning away. “I’m glad to help.”

Jess trudged loudly down the stairs just then and everyone turned to look at her. “Hey,” she said to everyone in general and no one in particular.

“Morning Jess,” I said.

“Did I miss the battle?” Jess asked eyeing my outfit dubiously as she stifled a yawn. I

simply grinned at her.

“Good morning, Jessica,” Ethan said. “Jessica, this is Timothy,” he said as Timothy stepped forward and inclined his head toward Jess. “Timothy, this is Elly’s sister, Jessica. She’s the one you’ll be guarding today.”

“So, you’re gonna be my babysitter while these guys are off playing with swords?” Jess asked sarcastically, arching one eyebrow at Timothy.

“Jess!” I scolded.

“What?” Jess asked, giving me an overly innocent look.

“For your information,” I admonished, “Timothy has put himself at great risk simply by coming here, and you don’t even *want* to know what will happen to you without his protection.”

“Right.” Jess said, frowning at Timothy. “Sorry.” She turned back to me then. “But you know,” she began in her best *for-your-information-tone*, “it’s just a little frustrating being the only one not participating around here. I don’t like you going off to battle without me, and I don’t like having to be babysat.”

Ahhh.

“Sorry Jess,” I said, trying to see through the other camera lens again. “Things will get back to normal as soon as this is finished. Then you can forget all about it.”

“Like that’s ever going to happen,” Jess replied tersely. I sighed.

“Go get some breakfast Jess.”

Jess shot me a sideways glance then went over to the kitchen.

I looked apologetically at Ethan and Timothy. Ethan wore his weapons: sword slung around his hips, a knife sheathed in the side of his boot, and another sword handle visible over the top of his left shoulder. Theo was similarly attired. They all seemed well armed, but something was missing ...

“What about all of you?” I asked. “Aren’t you wearing some kind of armour?”

“No, it would only slow us down,” Theo commented offhandedly.

Uh uh. Not going to fly.

“I think you guys should be wearing chainmaille too.” I leveled my *no-nonsense* look at Ethan—I wasn’t taking “no” for an answer on this one.

Ethan opened his mouth, but before he could say anything I added, “You know, I’ll refuse to wear this if you don’t put some on. Besides,” I said, softening my tone, “I’d feel better if I knew you had something on to protect you.”

Ethan closed his mouth again without saying anything. He paused, studying me for a moment.

“How does anyone get to be as stubborn as you are?” he asked, his expression just shy of a grin.

“It’s a long story,” I replied, arching an eyebrow at him. “Are you putting on the chainmaille or do I take mine off?” I didn’t miss Theo’s frustrated groan nor did I miss the way Timothy glanced uncertainly between Ethan and me.

Ethan stood silently measuring me for a moment. He frowned.

“Fine,” he said with some exasperation. “If it will make you feel better, we will *all* put on chainmaille.”

“What?” Theo protested. Ethan shot him a look. Theo made a face, his expression not unlike that of a child being forced to eat dreaded brussels sprouts.

“Thank you,” I replied sincerely.

Ethan only looked at me, an indecipherable expression on his face, his eyes a warm shade of sea green.

I was still watching Ethan's eyes when I heard footsteps on the deck. Ethan spun around, eyeing the door warily. We watched anxiously as Liam strode into the cabin. Timothy already had his sword halfway out of its sheath.

Liam quickly surveyed our faces and hastily said, "Everything's fine. No one's out there." We all breathed a collective sigh of relief.

Liam came over to Ethan, giving Timothy a cautious glance, and Timothy shoved his sword back into its sheath. Liam scanned my armour and nodded approvingly.

"That turned out well," Liam said. "I'm glad we got it done in time. It should work for you." He nodded at Theo. Liam turned back to me. "How does it feel?"

"Not bad," I said. "It gets a lot lighter if I shift a little. I'll still be able to move well enough."

"Fortunately," Ethan began a little sarcastically, "you're just in time. We were *all* going to get our chainmaille and put it on."

"Count me out," Liam said casually. "I don't need it."

"Actually you do. Elly says she won't wear hers unless we all wear a shirt."

"You can't be serious," Liam objected, shooting me an appalled look. "We don't need armour. We'll be fine. Besides, at the rate we heal we'll hardly notice if someone does get a lucky swipe in."

"I'm perfectly serious," I said and folded my arms across my stomach. "You wouldn't let me fight without this. Why is it any less risky for you?"

"Because we've done this before. You haven't," Liam replied a little heatedly.

"It's a fight. With swords and knives. You're still at risk," I returned, and then added in a softer tone: "Please. It will make me feel better." I looked among the three faces in front of me. Theo rolled his eyes, but no one voiced open opposition.

"Liam," Ethan stated quietly but firmly, "we all put on chainmaille." He said it matter-of-factly. Liam wore a sour expression, but said nothing further. "Let's go suit up," Ethan said heavily. The three of them exchanged a reluctant glance then disappeared up the stairs.

I looked over at Jess. She sat at the kitchen island eating a bowl of cereal and watching me silently.

"What?" I asked, feeling a little unnerved by the way she was staring at me.

"Just never knew you could be so bossy," Jess replied, her tone a mixture of confusion and wariness.

"You haven't seen anything yet," I returned irritably, walking into the living room.

I stared out the front window feeling unsettled, trying to keep the dread caged and wishing I had something to do. Ethan was right: waiting was not our friend. I studied the scene outside, unaffected by the cold beauty of the lake. The verdant leaves of the surrounding trees were just becoming tinged with gold and red, the mix of colours now reflected in the far shore of the lake. This view would likely be amazing a few weeks from now. I pictured the trees exploding in a riot of colour, the ground covered with the quiet yellow of leaves. The sun rose higher in the sky, now reflecting in the water and sending sparks of light bouncing off the waves. I wondered if it was as warm outside as it looked. Did that matter during a battle? Would a person even notice the weather?

The battle. The dread of last night rolled over in my stomach, larger and heavier than it had been the night before, and I felt a vague nausea rise up. Something bad was coming. I hated

knowing that. I hoped that whatever was coming would hunt only me. I could accept that, but what if Jess got in the way—or Ethan for that matter. I wondered at the thought of how quickly three strangers had come to mean so much to me and I cringed at the idea of losing them. My world—heck, the entire human world—would be a much poorer place if anything happened to them. I wondered again if I could meet the chaeli by myself—turn myself in and not risk anyone else.

I heard quiet footsteps on the stairs and I recognized Ethan's heartbeat. The sound was permanently etched on my brain. I was certain I could pick it out from among a million other heartbeats. I didn't bother to shift back down.

Ethan came to stand beside me as I stared out the window. I turned and saw he was outfitted in his chainmaille. I smiled. He looked like something out of an epic movie scene—like a knight going into battle. My gaze lingered on him a few moments longer, taking in not just the sight of him but *him*. He stood there, tall and strong and ... *perfect*. Add to that the fact that he could dance *and* wield a sword. What more could a girl ask for? Where on earth would I ever meet someone like him again?

Nowhere.

I sighed and reluctantly turned my gaze back to the lake. Under different circumstances—if he could exist here or I could exist there—I was certain things would have been different for us. The now-familiar dread raised its ugly head again, and I cringed away from it. Ethan looked at me inquisitively.

"What are you thinking about?" he asked.

If I told him, would he stay? I was worried he might and even more worried that, despite hearing it, he would not. Either way, I wasn't going to tell him. Perhaps something a little more general ...

"I was thinking about how this still feels wrong. I was worrying about what might happen to the three of you today. And, I was wondering if there was anything I could do to change what was coming."

"And did you come up with anything?" he asked in a wary tone.

"Oh, sure," I nodded, "I came up with a few ideas, but I know none of them will change anything, so there's no point in pursuing them."

"I don't see any reason for things to go badly," Ethan said, his face relaxing.

"That's the problem: if you could see it, you could avoid it. I don't suppose you would allow me to go face them alone, would you?" I asked off-handedly, trying to sneak it in like a grade schooler yelling he'll be home late as he hurries out the door to meet his friends.

"No, I don't suppose I would," Ethan said with a wry chuckle.

"I didn't think so. I thought about leaving to find them on my own" My thought was cut short by the withering look Ethan shot at me.

"But you're not going to do that, *are you?*" It was an order, not a question.

"No," I said, ignoring his tone, "for three reasons: first, I know you would track me down and we would end up fighting the chaeli anyway; second, because I feel you have a say in this matter and it wouldn't be fair of me to be so heavy-handed in the decision-making; and third—and mostly—because the thought of doing that doesn't make the dread go away, so it likely wouldn't do any good anyway."

"All very good reasons to stay with us."

"So it would seem."

Liam and Theo came down the stairs then. They wore their chainmaille and the same sour

expression as when they had gone upstairs. I didn't care. They could be mad at me. At least I had done what I could to protect them.

"Theo," Ethan directed, "I'll ask you to run patrol now. Let us know if you see anything. Otherwise come back when you want me to relieve you." Theo nodded and slipped on his greatcoat. I glanced at the sun shining down on the lake and then back at Theo's coat.

"Is it cold out?" I asked Liam.

"No, it's actually unseasonably warm," Liam replied.

Ethan followed my gaze to Theo's coat. "The coat is to keep the maille quiet," he explained. Then, turning to Theo he said, "Stay in the upper frames, Theo." Theo nodded.

"Will the warmth help us in the fight?" I asked to no one in particular, but it was Theo who answered.

"Good question," he said. "I didn't even consider that in my first battle. It has good points and bad. If your hands stay warm it's easier to grip your weapons, but you get hot right away. Especially wearing chainmaille," he added, casting me a deprecatory frown. "Also, cold will help stop wounds from bleeding out." Liam burst out laughing, but tried to get himself under control when he caught Ethan's hard look.

"Oh, very nice," Jess shot at Theo from her seat at the island. They exchanged a baleful glance.

"Yes, I can see how that would be helpful Theo," I said dryly, not quite believing I was having this conversation. Theo chuckled while I wondered if I was a fainter. I hadn't fainted when Ethan and Liam had finished off the chaeli Maybe I would be all right.

"Time to go, Theo," Ethan said, giving Theo a disapproving frown. "You don't have to worry about wounds, Elly. Just stay close to me."

"I wasn't actually worrying about myself," I said.

Ethan frowned.

"You needn't worry about us either. We can handle things perfectly well."

"But you could get hurt."

"We heal pretty fast," Liam offered, still grinning.

"Very reassuring Liam," I said sarcastically. He only laughed again.

Theo threw me a grin from where he stood by the door, then shifted and slipped outside. We all stood in silence for a moment.

"Okay," I said, turning to Ethan, "what do we do now?" I had decided I hated waiting. Why couldn't we just find the chaeli, ambush them and finish this whole thing?

"Liam and I need to discuss strategy."

Fine—anything for a distraction.

"I can help with that."

"Your only strategy will be to remain close to me, remember?" Ethan asked, giving me a suspicious look.

Right.

"I can still help with strategy," I said, ignoring his question. "Simple problem-solving, right? Besides, I can't just sit here waiting. It's making me nervous."

Ethan hesitated, studied me carefully for several moments, then nodded his head. The four of us sat down at the kitchen table—Timothy joining us. Evidently, he had experience in this sort of thing. Jess sat listening from her perch at the kitchen island, drinking a cup of tea.

Ethan began by outlining the area he had found where he planned to stage the fight—

essentially a small clearing on one of the many surrounding hills—and he and Liam began planning how to use it to our advantage. I added my two cents occasionally. It was my idea to have Liam and Theo hide in the bushes until we knew what we would be dealing with. The three men simultaneously turned blank stares on me, surprised someone as inexperienced as me had been able to come up with such a plan. They regarded one another then and revered the indisputable wisdom of my suggestion—or so I would have liked to think. Actually they just sort of nodded in stunned agreement.

Timothy threw in a few cautions about human time battles—like making sure you knew what was in the other frequency before you shifted so you wouldn't accidentally shift yourself into the middle of a lake or some other very inconvenient situation. Ethan said he knew the area in the other frequency and it would pose no dangers to us during a battle.

I was careful not to talk about my role in the battle—how I had every intention of helping them if they needed help. I thought it best not to tip Ethan off or he'd have me in another province by noon. Unfortunately, Ethan was one step ahead of me—as usual. At one point, he turned and looked directly at me.

“Elly,” he began, fixing his stern cobalt eyes on me, “I want you to promise me you will stay out of the fight except for protecting yourself should it be necessary. If you stay close to me, I'll do my utmost to ensure it doesn't come to that. Please promise me you won't fight.”

Ummm, no?

I wanted to help—I could help—if I didn't freeze up, panic, or faint. I surveyed Ethan's face for a moment, wondering how best to respond. I stepped out onto a limb ...

“What if I can help? I don't want to just stand there if you're in trouble. Besides, there might be other things I could do.”

Ethan's face went strangely blank—completely devoid of emotion. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, his lips pressed together. When he opened his eyes again, they were the clear, cold blue of a prairie sky in January. I wanted to turn away, but my gaze was locked in his.

“You. Will. Not. Fight,” he said in the sort of quiet tone that was more unnerving than if he had just yelled at me. I worked to suck in a breath.

My first impulse was to protest—strenuously—but the expression in Ethan's eyes and the tenor of his voice told me that probably wasn't the best response. I swallowed hard, still unable to look away—or breathe.

“I can't promise that,” I said tentatively. “It's wrong. I can't just stand there and watch if one of you is getting hurt.”

I saw a rare flash of angry frustration turn Ethan's eyes a wet-cement sort of blue. His mouth tightened into a line and he turned away from my face, staring down at the table in front of him.

“That's *exactly* what you should do,” he said, not looking up. He did look at me then, and frankly, given the expression on his face, I would have preferred he had continued to look at the table. “Elly, you can't be stubborn on this one,” he said. “I need to know where you are during the battle or I can't protect you.” His tone went from stern to harsh. “If you become involved in the fight, you become a variable I can no longer control. You're a loose cannon. You could take us all down with your recklessness.” By the time he finished his voice was barely controlled.

“What about Theo and Liam?” I countered. “Can you control them in a battle?”

“Yes. They are known quantities and they have their orders. They are under my control.”

“So give me orders.”

“I’m ordering you to *stand down!*” Ethan demanded.

“I can’t do that!” I insisted.

Timothy shoved himself back in his chair, growing taller in his seat and gawking at me as if I had just set fire to the living room. He quickly glanced at Ethan.

Ethan stood up abruptly, his chair rattling backward and almost tipping over. Liam reached out to steady it before it clattered to the floor. Ethan shifted and strode out of the cabin so fast I only had time to feel startled before I heard the door close a lot more firmly than it needed to. I jumped in my seat and spun to look at the now-closed door. I turned slowly back to Liam. He looked at the door and then at me. Liam raised his brow as he met my gaze.

“Well, that was ... *bold.*” He said it like there was another word he was going to say instead. His words fairly dripped with censure and one corner of his mouth turned down.

“Yeah—not so good Elly,” Jess said quietly from where she sat. “Bossy is one thing, but honestly”

“How is my wanting to help so wrong?” I asked.

“Ethan’s the one in charge for a reason,” Liam said in a straightforward tone. “He knows what he’s doing. He’s right, you know. You would be a loose cannon. You’re inexperienced and we could wind up hurting you ourselves if you’re in the wrong place at the wrong time.” Liam’s tone softened as he added. “Ethan’s already made a big compromise just by letting you be near the battle. He’d hide you someplace safe if he had his way. Not only have you insisted on being in the middle of the fight, now you want to participate in it. That’s pretty demanding and makes it a little difficult for him to protect you—don’t you think?”

Ohhh ... Ohhh.

At that, the pieces of the puzzle suddenly fell into place all at once—no sorting, no turning—just *there* like a backward video of someone tossing a finished puzzle into the air. I felt myself go cold. Through the wide front window I could see Ethan pacing across the deck of the cabin, a dark expression on his face.

Okay. Maybe I’m out of bounds on this one.

I looked back at Liam. “I think I’d better go apologize,” I said sheepishly.

“You might want to do that,” Liam said, nodding.

“Huh, do ya think?” Jess added sarcastically. I shot her a sideways glance and she raised her eyebrows. “Well, seriously, Elly, what *are* you thinking? What can you do in a battle with swords?” I frowned and turned away.

I headed to the door and slipped my jacket on over top my chainmaille shirt. I walked along the side of the cabin, making my way to where Ethan still paced. I rounded the corner of the deck and promptly collided with Ethan who was heading in the opposite direction. We both must have been moving at a good pace because it was like running into a charging horse head on. I sort of bounced off him. He grabbed my shoulders to keep me from falling backward, and let go again the instant my feet were squarely under me. We stood staring at one another for several moments before we simultaneously said, “I’m sorry”. We both laughed uneasily.

“You first,” Ethan said politely, a small grin still on his face.

“I’m sorry, Ethan. That was selfish of me. I wasn’t seeing this from your perspective. Liam explained how I was making your job a lot more difficult and he’s right. I didn’t mean to do that. I only wanted to help.” I paused at that point, looking down. The next part was the bit I *really* didn’t want to say—I’d likely be in protective custody after I said it. However I took a breath, looked up at Ethan, and continued. “I’ll do whatever you want me to do.”

Ethan's eyebrows shot up then drew together and he studied me for a moment.

"You would do anything I asked?" Ethan tilted his head as he continued to watch me.

I swallowed hard wondering which province I'd be going to. Well, I had committed this far I squared my shoulders, and raised my chin. "Yes, whatever you ask."

"And you would trust me to decide what was best? Even if it meant having you go someplace safe?"

"Yes." I sighed and stared down at the deck. I wondered if Ethan would order Timothy to take me away or if he'd take me himself. When several moments had passed and Ethan still hadn't said anything, I looked back up at him. He watched me through calculating eyes wearing a slight frown.

"In that case," Ethan said decisively, "I will leave you to decide what you will do during the battle—taking into account my need to keep you safe."

"So . . . , you're not sending me away? I can stay?"

"No I'm not, and yes, you can."

"So . . . , you're saying I can do whatever I want during the battle?" I asked, eyeing Ethan skeptically.

"Not exactly," he said, "I'm saying I'm letting you *decide* what you *ought* to do. You just said you're willing to set aside what you want in consideration of the needs of the others. If you can do that then you can be trusted to make good decisions."

Wow. So much for being put under lock and key.

"Thank you," I said. Ethan only smiled at me. I tucked one strand of hair behind my ear and bit my lip as I looked out over the water. I turned back to Ethan. "Do you still think I should go somewhere safe?" I asked reluctantly. The idea seemed wrong.

Ethan tilted his head and studied me with an unreadable expression.

"I think it would be best but I also think you should decide that."

I had just opened my mouth to reply—even at that point not entirely sure what was about to come out of it—when I heard the thud of a booted foot on the deck. Ethan and I both turned to see Theo hurrying across the deck. He was beside us before either of us could take a second breath.

"They're coming."

Chapter 20: The Battle

Ethan, Theo, Liam, and I walked quickly but quietly through the spattered shadows under the trees—single file to hide our numbers of course. The branches and scrub clawed at my sleeves and pant legs and caught in my hair, but the brush also shielded us mercifully from the worst of the heat.

Ethan led the way, his tall figure clad in a greatcoat despite the hot sun. The bottom of the coat patted the top of his boots with each step he took. The sound seemed louder in this frame. I was only vaguely aware of Liam and Theo following behind me, their coat sleeves whispering a hushed swishing rhythm as they walked.

Ironically, it wasn't the creatures stalking us that consumed my thoughts as we marched to face them in battle—Ethan's confident, unwavering stride gave me some encouragement on that front. No, it was the idea of time and all of its limitations that circled my head like a vulture wheeling above a corpse. This was it: the coming of the end. This was the last, what? Ten minutes, maybe an hour, I would have with Ethan—likely with Liam and Theo too. Some of us might not survive the pending battle and even if we all survived, Ethan would leave when it was over. The others would probably leave with him and I might well be left all alone after everything was said and done. Would I even get to say goodbye to any of them?

That bothered me and I didn't know what to do about it. What if I didn't get to say goodbye to Ethan? What if these were the last minutes I would have to tell him how much he meant to me or to find out if I meant anything to him? Even now—even after everything that had happened—I couldn't be *certain* of how he felt. What I did know was I couldn't live with never knowing. That idea twisted in my stomach and tightened my throat. We hiked on, my thoughts muddled by indecision as I tried to figure out what to do.

At some point Ethan had turned and led us north. The dappled shadows dripping from the trees thinned out like raindrops in the wake of a passing cloud, and the leaves became a lighter green. While the air warmed slightly, it also moved more freely, and I welcomed the gentle breeze as it swept through my chainmaille. Ethan stopped. He turned to Liam and Theo. One nod of his head sent them off in opposite directions, one to each side of our position. I watched as they disappeared into the brush behind us. Ethan turned to me then, a stern expression on his face.

"You're with me. Stay close," he ordered. He turned and led me to the far end of the clearing.

This is it. It's now or never.

My timing for this was the worst it could possibly be. It occurred to me that maybe it was already too late, but my options were few at this point and their numbers were dwindling by the second. I wasn't about to leave this world (or let Ethan leave it) without knowing how he felt. That thought tore the air from my lungs. I gulped in a breath as quietly as I could, hoping Ethan wouldn't notice. I glanced at him as he steadfastly continued forward. His shoulders stiffened and his head tilted to one side as he walked, but he didn't turn. I forced my feet to keep pace

with his.

When we reached the edge of the clearing, Ethan stopped a few steps ahead of me and turned to survey the field we had just crossed. I took a deep breath to steady myself, my heart thudding against my ribs. Ethan turned to me with a curious expression on his face and I cringed inwardly, knowing he could likely hear my heart pounding in my temples. I tried to swallow past the lump in my throat. I stared up at him, watching his eyes turn the colour of water flowing under ice and forced my feet forward.

I saw surprise flicker across Ethan's face as he watched me step closer to him. His brow furrowed and one corner of his mouth turned down, but he didn't stop me. Encouraged by his silence, I pushed myself forward the last two steps. Ethan looked at me like he was standing on shore, watching helplessly as a ship sank before his eyes.

I reached a trembling hand to Ethan's cheek. I felt that jolt of energy as it passed through my palm and up my arm—just like every other time—and I inhaled sharply. Ethan stiffened, his shoulders pulling back, but he didn't move his face away. He looked at me for a moment then winced. He lowered his head and closed his eyes. He stood, frozen in place, his hands clenched into fists at his sides. I could hear his heart pounding out a fast rhythm and his quick, shallow breathing.

"Ethan," I began, pausing when I felt him flinch at the sound of his name, "I know we don't have a lot of time, but I couldn't ..."

I never finished the sentence. Ethan's head came up and his midnight blue eyes flashed open, searing into my own. A short gasp of air caught in my throat, not making it all the way to my lungs. I took a quick half step backward, letting my hand fall dead by my side. My palm continued to burn, and I felt myself sinking as the blood drained from my face. I stood waiting for an angry torrent to be loosed on me, but it never came.

Ethan's gaze met mine then veered to the far end of the clearing. His eyes narrowed and his shoulders squared as he lowered his chin. He was behind me before I could follow his movement. I turned to find him again. He stood in front of me now, his back toward me, his left arm angled back, partly protecting and partly keeping me close. His right arm was half raised by his side. I turned to the far line of trees, but saw nothing.

Shift up.

I closed my eyes and tried to concentrate. It was difficult to listen for heartbeats while I was trying to listen for movement. I changed my focus and found my frame. I opened my eyes. Ethan hadn't moved, but I could see him more clearly now—sharper lines, brighter colours. Stillness reigned and the only sound was the rattling of the wind as it pushed through the leaves of the surrounding trees.

Ethan shrugged out of his greatcoat, letting it slide down his arms. It pooled to the ground with a whispered thud. Sunlight bounced off the end of the blade slung across his back as he reached for the handle of the longsword that hung at his hip. He drew it out of its sheath in a great arc. He stood in front of me, both hands holding the sword high and to the right of his line of vision, the blade aimed down at the brush opposite us.

Then I heard the sounds: the heavy thump of booted feet, the crackling of crushed leaves, the rustle of tall grass, and the snapping of small twigs. These drifted toward me in individual waves that pulsed against my ears. Ethan adjusted his stance, stepping back several centimeters.

Not good.

My heart beat faster, and I let my jacket fall to the ground. My hand moved to the wide belt

that secured my maille shirt and held my sword in place. I pulled the sword from its sheath and held it in trembling hands. I adjusted my frame and decreased the weight of the sword. My knees quivered. The sun became concentrated and the breeze slowed in this time frame. I waited, growing uncomfortably warm. I planted my feet and leveled my sword. While I fidgeted, Ethan stood, as unmoving as a statue.

A faint jostling of the trees at the far edge of the clearing caught my eye. I turned to see two figures gush out of the bushes, their shadows pouring out from the bottom of their coats to run in a stream in front of them. I looked at the twisted faces of the creatures that now watched me and reminded myself this was what we wanted—what we had planned. I willed my feet to remain where they were, pushing them into the ground more firmly.

I glanced from one creature to the other. Thin graying skin hung from prominent cheekbones, stretched in the corners like a sweater on a hanger. Eyes that had been left to sink unattended into their sockets, shone from the depths like the last of a fire's coals. The creatures were tall despite their stooped postures. They wore what could loosely be termed uniforms, albeit ratty and of an indistinguishable colour. A badge was displayed prominently on the sleeves of their left arms. If I had seen them separately, I might have thought they were the same creature except for one distinguishing difference: the one on the left wore an eye patch. Corbett, I thought, remembering a description Liam had given us that morning.

Both creatures held swords aloft with bony arms as they slowly but steadily approached, cords of muscles straining against bones. Even from this distance I could see the purple veins of their arthritic hands just under the thin surface of grey skin. I knew if I listened I would hear the pulse within those veins. I tried not to listen.

The sun glinted off one of the chaeli's swords (no eye patch so it must have been Delano) and I watched as the particles of light bounced off the metal and burst into a spray of colour like fireworks. The two creatures tramped forward, sending up a cacophony of sounds: the rustle of heavy clothing, the jangle of chainmaille, the scrape of metal as one of them pulled out a knife. Their coarse breathing rattled over top of it all.

The breeze blew past the two chaeli and continued on toward us carrying with it a sickly sweet smell that made my stomach turn. I swallowed against the pressure rising up in my throat. What was that? An animal? Rage? Rot?

Death.

The creatures didn't slow as they advanced on us, their pace even and measured. Ethan took another step back, reaching with his left hand to move me further behind him.

What now?

I craned my head around Ethan, peering at Corbett and Delano as they continued their approach. Beyond them, four more chaeli emerge from the brush. I lost my breath, and for a moment, I nearly lost my precarious hold on my frame. The other four creatures formed a line behind their leaders and my heart sank—we were outnumbered.

Definitely not part of the plan.

Corbett and Delano stopped when they reached the center of the clearing. Delano sneered—an expression possibly intended as a smile. It didn't quite come out that way.

"It seems Liam didn't like our offer," he drawled, his voice grating like fingernails on a chalkboard, making my teeth ache. "Hand over the girl and we will let you live," he said, as though he were making a generous offer.

“Never,” Ethan replied in a steady voice as he shook his head.

“You do not know what you are doing. She is dangerous—even to you. There is no need to die for this one. I suggest you reconsider.”

“No.” I heard Ethan’s heart rate slow into an even rhythm. He took a deep breath, and I saw his shoulders and arms relax slightly, the tip of his sword lowering with them.

Corbett issued a sharp curse that spewed out in a hiss and the two chaeli charged forward. Ethan rushed to meet them, running so fast I couldn’t follow most of his advance—I only saw flashes of motion. I had seen Ethan *fight* before, but this was a *battle*. I drew in a steadying breath and watched his rhythmic movements as he instantaneously changed from one frame to the next and back again. The battle appeared to be taking place under a strobe light. Scenes of movement too fast to be seen alternated with scenes frozen in time as the players shifted in and out of frames.

Ethan moved faster and shifted more readily than the chaeli. He had enough of an edge that he delivered a slash to each of the two leaders as he rushed between them, slowing just as his blade connected with flesh to deliver the full weight of the blow. The chaeli never saw it coming and they growled when his blade made contact with their arms. Corbett turned on Ethan, swinging his blade wide, but Ethan shifted to a faster frame and dodged the sword.

A movement off to the side of the clearing caught my eye, and I turned to see the other four chaeli start toward me. Theo emerged from the line of trees then. I quickly glanced over to the other side of the clearing to see Liam stepping out from the bushes too. The coats Liam and Theo wore were quickly abandoned and the two men drew their swords.

I looked back at Ethan. He had slowed Corbett and Delano, but they had gotten much closer to me than I expected. I assumed that was a bad thing considering I was the intended target. Ethan continued to swirl around them, effectively blocking each step toward me and trying to force them in the opposite direction. The leaders let out frustrated snarls with each swing of their swords, never able to make contact with Ethan. Ethan alternated between the two creatures, taking a swing at one then circling to strike at the other. Corbett and Delano spun, trying to keep up with him, but he was always one step ahead of their blades.

I watched as Ethan adjusted for gravity and launched himself over Delano. Ethan somersaulted in mid-air, swinging his sword at the neck of the creature below him as he flew overtop. Delano ducked in time to save his neck, but the blade caught his unprotected head, and he dropped to one knee. Ethan landed on his feet and swung around to press his advantage with the fallen Delano, but Corbett cut him off. Ethan shifted and was gone from view. Too late, Corbett lunged forward, his blade swishing through empty space. Ethan appeared behind him, landing a strike along his upper back. Ethan circled and came at the two chaeli again while Corbett reeled, trying to keep his footing. Ethan made use of his advantage, getting in a quick strike at Corbett’s chest. Corbett’s armor saved him from Ethan’s blow and Delano struggled to his feet.

I looked over at Theo and Liam. They had broken up the other four chaeli, taking two each. I watched the separate fights in awe, listening to the guttural sounds of the chaeli as they hissed and growled. Following what was happening required huge mental leaps and I had to fill in the missing pieces of the stop and go battles. Usually only one or two of each group was visible at any given time, the others shifting to other frequencies and out of sight. I stared stupidly at the alternating blinding speed and slow motion movements of the participants.

A loud clang brought my attention abruptly back to Ethan’s group. The group had gotten uncomfortably close, and I took several steps to the side, almost reaching the edge of the

clearing. Ethan stood towering over Corbett, their swords pressed together as each of them struggled to drive their blade into the other's throat. I saw Delano rush at Ethan from behind and was about to call out when Ethan vanished. Delano stopped abruptly, but the weight of his charge carried him forward several steps and his sword nearly connected with Corbett's chainmaille. He instinctively spun, swinging his blade around behind himself. I heard the ring of metal on metal and saw Ethan's sword sail through the air toward me. Without thinking I leapt to catch the sword mid way through its fall.

"I've got it!" I called. I don't know how it all happened, but the sword was suddenly in my hand and I was already turning, finding Ethan, and swinging my arm around to toss the hilt of the sword to him all in one movement. I threw the sword high and Ethan jumped to catch it. He grabbed the sword in mid air, spun, and blocked Delano's sword. I backed up, moving closer to the brush.

In the grand scheme of things, that little parlour trick may not have been my undoing, but then again, it might have been. I didn't think about it at the time, but later realized it was probably that stunt that gave me away. Corbett and Delano now had a pretty good idea of the extent of my abilities, although perhaps not fully knowing how well I could shift.

Delano managed to take several steps in my direction before Ethan cut him off. The group circled closer. I backed up a few more steps only to have a branch jab me in the back. If either of the chaeli got any closer I'd be trapped. That's when it hit me: I was being utterly useless—like one of those stupid girls in adventure movies who stand screaming while everyone else fights off the big, scary monster. Ethan may not want me to fight, but that didn't mean I had to be useless.

Wondering what would be considered useful in this particular situation, I realized that, if this were a game of capture the flag then I was undoubtedly the flag. I didn't know if hiding the flag was cheating or not (I couldn't remember the last time I'd played the game), but I was pretty sure this particular game didn't have a lot of rules. I shifted and stepped into the scratching bushes, ignoring the sharp jabs of branches on my arms. I saw Delano turn, trying to find me as I sank deeper into the bushes. I wasn't certain if I was being a "loose cannon", but surely I could manage to stay out of the way. Couldn't I?

I peered through the thin layer of brush I was hiding behind, to where Theo still battled the other chaeli. Theo was moving intently toward a fallen chaeli, blade raised high, but what he didn't know—what he couldn't see—was that the second chaeli was making a silent approach behind him, its face twisted into an evil sneer and its sword raised.

No time! Move!

I shifted and bolted through the brush (I must have shifted fairly high up because either I didn't notice the branches clawing at me or they had disappeared) and emerged behind the sneering chaeli. Sneer didn't turn, intent on reaching Theo. Just as Theo's blade began to come down on the fallen chaeli, Sneer blurred into a lunge, his blade aimed at Theo.

I shifted, adjusted for gravity, and launched myself at Sneer. It was like trying to hit a flying arrow with a bullet. My course was accurate, but I had to adjust my speed several times in midflight to time the impact right. Just as Sneer's sword swung down on an unsuspecting Theo, I pulled out of my shift and let all of my weight fall on my sword, driving it into Sneer's neck where it lodged with a stomach-turning *sloosh*. I let momentum carry me forward, tumbling onto the grass a short ways off. I stopped and quickly righted myself, preparing for another attack. Honestly, I'm not sure what I thought I could do given that my sword was still embedded in Sneer's neck. Turns out it didn't matter.

Sneer spun around, off balance. His sword fell from his hand as he reached up to pull my shortsword from the back of his neck, a puzzled expression on his twisted face. He looked at my sword in his hand, dripping dark blood, while his other hand found the hole in his throat where the blade had come through the front. Black-red blood dribbled from the hole, air bubbling through it as the chaeli choked out a breath. Sneer turned to where I crouched on the grass, confusion turning into dull recognition. He stared at me through hollow eyes as he sank to his knees and slumped to the ground face first, my sword still in his hand.

I shifted and moved to retrieve my sword from Sneer's hand. I turned to Theo just in time to see his blade find its mark on the fallen chaeli. Something rolled away into the brush, and I averted my eyes.

Some things I just don't want to know.

And yet, I did know—of course I knew. My eyes met Theo's across the short span of clearing. I watched a flash of anxiety turn his brown eyes a deep coffee colour just before he saw Sneer lying on the ground in front of me. Surprise registered on Theo's face as he looked down at the creature then back up to me. I couldn't help but grin. So much for being useless, I thought just a little smugly. Theo raised his sword high as he walked over to the fallen chaeli in front of me. I knew what he was about to do and I really didn't want to stay to watch. I shifted and moved back into the brush and out of sight.

I turned to Liam's group. I winced as the sword handle of one of the chaeli slammed into the side of Liam's face. Liam reeled back a step, but quickly shifted and disappeared from the chaeli's sight—but not mine. I was just considering going to help when I saw Theo appear between the chaeli and Liam. Theo blocked a blind swing of the chaeli's sword. Okay, Liam and Theo were fighting even odds now, but Ethan was still outnumbered.

I ran around the edge of the clearing, staying within the cover of the brush as I made my way toward Ethan's group. I could see only Ethan and Delano and assumed Corbett had temporarily shifted to the other frequency. Except that ... I hadn't seen any of the lesser chaeli do that By the time I got close to the group, Corbett still had not reappeared.

Something's wrong—very wrong!

I reached the part of the clearing where Ethan still danced around Delano, deftly avoiding his sword. I crouched down within the cover of the undergrowth, watching and waiting for Corbett to reappear. Ethan was easily gaining the upper hand in the fight now that he fought only one of the leaders. With a quick, determined strike, Ethan slashed across Delano's side and spun past Delano without slowing. Ethan's blurred spin brought him behind Delano, providing the target for another slash. Delano arched backward and began to fall.

And that was all I saw.

When I thought about it later, I realized the bitter irony of the situation. Yes, just as my intuition had warned, things went very badly from that point forward. The thing that troubled me then and still haunts me now is: it wasn't because of any decisions or orders Ethan had devised. In the end, it had been my own carelessness that brought about the bad ending I had been trying so desperately to avoid.

It was true—I was well hidden—but that also meant I was hidden from anyone who might have called out a warning, come to help me, or blocked Corbett's path. I was so intent on Ethan's fight I missed the sound of approaching footsteps. I missed the rustle of heavy clothes. Missed the metallic clink of chainmaille and missed the creeping approach of the smell I couldn't identify.

Suddenly, a steel band encircled my waist, bending my ribs inward and I felt the cool smoothness of metal at my throat. I lost my breath in a single gasp and tried to lean away from the sword as I heard a sharp hiss in my ear.

So that's where Corbett went.

Well, that was the stupidest thing you've ever done.

"Enough!" Corbett yelled in a voice that felt like sandpaper on my ears. He limped forward, dragging me out of the brush and into full view of the combatants. His sword never left its place at my throat. Suddenly, all movement stopped and all eyes turned to me. I grimaced. Now I was worse than useless—I was a liability.

"Drop your weapons!" Corbett demanded. I tried to ignore the order, but Corbett pressed his sword more firmly to my throat and tightened his grip. I lost my breath and had to drop my sword. I heard the deafening thud as it landed on the ground beside me. The two chaeli Liam and Theo had been fighting took the weapons from the three men and herded them into a line in front of Corbett and me.

Corbett's decaying scent mingled with the smell of sword oil and sun-warmed leather, turning my stomach. I fought the wave of nausea that swept over me each time I took a breath. Some part of my brain was distracted by the unidentified smell until I realized what it reminded me of: sulfur. The stench made it difficult to breathe and even more difficult to think.

I adjusted my weight, pushing against Corbett and trying to find some imbalance in his stance. He didn't move or even try to counter my force—he didn't have to. He easily weighed at least twice what I did, maybe three times as much. My ineffectual struggle had no impact on him.

Next.

I slammed my head back, hoping to come into contact with a vulnerable nose or even a chin, but my head only connected solidly with Corbett's chainmaille shirt giving off a dull clank. My feet could find no mark either—especially since they were barely making contact with the ground.

Ethan, Liam, and Theo had been forced to kneel in a row in front of me. The two lesser chaeli flanked the row. Delano stood off to one side, closer to Corbett and myself. I studied the faces of the three men. Liam's eyes were the colour of storm clouds heavy with icy rain, the drowning man flailing in their waters. Our gaze caught and held for a short moment before Liam turned away. Theo's eyes were dark shadows of pure rage. He watched Corbett with a look that would kill, if such a thing were possible. Theo glanced briefly at me, winced, then cast Delano a baleful glare. I turned to Ethan last. His midnight blue eyes met mine. I couldn't decipher what I saw there. Pain? Agony? Frustration? Rage? For several moments I studied him, lost in his turmoil.

I saw movement out of the corner of my eye. Delano was marching purposefully over to the three men with his sword raised and a low growl building in his throat. Blood oozed from a cut on his neck, making a dark brown tree pattern as it seeped along the crevasses of his skin. A menacing smile spread across his distorted features as he watched the three men intently. The full horror of the situation swarmed down on me and I gasped.

My brain went into overdrive, frantically sorting the pieces and trying to jam them together into some sort of pattern, plan, idea—something—anything. What if I hadn't been in the wrong place at the wrong time? What if the guys weren't handicapped by me now? If there were no hostage, Delano would have no control. So how does one resolve a hostage situation?

Take out the hostage.

Of course. With me out of the picture, everything would change. So how do I take myself out of the picture? Shift to a different frequency entirely? I immediately shifted up, high and fast, trying to get all the way to the next frequency, but Corbett was quick. He kept up with my shifts frame by frame. When I reached the place where the others had disappeared—we were up on a hill now—Corbett was still with me and his blade was still at my throat.

“Back down! Now!” he ordered, pressing his sword deeper into my throat. I felt a sting and a thick, wet drop trickled down my skin. I sighed and shifted down, the others reappearing in front of me (or maybe we were the ones who had re-appeared). Delano had halted his limping march toward the men, but kept going when Corbett and I reappeared.

Okay, evidently Corbett had been ready for that. But what if I didn’t shift *up*? Would Corbett think I might shift *down*? My mind flashed back to the conversation about *eiliff mors*. True: I’d be left there along with Corbett, but the others would be free to fight. Was it possible? Could I shift Corbett with me?

Only one way to find out.

I took one last look at my friends and closed my eyes taking a deep breath. I reached up and grabbed Corbett’s forearm making certain I had a grip on him. It probably wasn’t necessary given the vise-like grip he already had on me as he pinned my shoulders and ribs. I shifted down from our frame and then shifted down again and still a third time, as quickly as I could.

I opened my eyes to find everything around us twisted and blurred like someone had run their hand across a chalk drawing, everything blending together.

“*Aeli! Nei! Naet!*” I heard Ethan’s distant yell in a quiet echo. As if part of the chalk drawing, I saw an unmoving Ethan reaching toward me, desperation in his eyes. I turned and glimpsed Liam frozen in a quick lunge for his sword, the edges of his image dusty and smearing into the grass surrounding him. In Theo’s picture, he already had his sword in his hand. I gripped Corbett’s arm more firmly and shifted again—at least, I *tried* to shift again.

I told my body to make the shift—willed it to do so—but my body didn’t respond. I was about to panic when I felt the beginnings of a shift and realized I was still shifting, only extremely slowly. Time was moving so sluggishly now there was a gap between thought and actual movement. I took a deep breath, concentrated, and shifted down again.

In that moment blackness consumed me. I heard the echo of a terrified wail and felt Corbett’s arms loosening their hold on me just before he let go entirely. Then I was alone in the inky blackness, fighting the cloying grip of claustrophobia. I struggled to draw a breath, but couldn’t. After a moment of panic I realized I didn’t need to—I wasn’t out of breath. There was no sight, sound, smell, or touch in the utter blackness that engulfed me. Nothing moved. Nothing existed. It was a vast, empty ... *nothing*.

The claustrophobia and panic subsided. I had seen this before. I knew where I was. This was my nightmare. It was with wry amusement I realized the theorists were wrong—thought, at least, existed here. I floated along on an endless sea of black, thinking about Ethan, Liam, and Theo and wondering how they had fared after I had disappeared.

I thought of Ethan. Memories flashed through my mind as though I were watching a video, Ethan’s face in every scene. I watched his smile. I watched his eyes changing colours. I watched him move. I heard his voice and smelled his scent. It was as if every sensation was relived, every thought a reality.

Maybe I could be happy here.

Chapter 21: Endings

I didn't know how long I floated there, reliving the past few weeks. It felt like months rolled into seconds. At some point (whether it was days or minutes later, I had no idea), I felt a change in temperature where my hand ought to have been. It started as a slow warming sensation in what might have been my fingers and slowly grew into a mild tingling. After another moment it turned into an insistent burn like the lingering hum after an electrical shock. I could almost see it—like I could see people's energies—a faint coloured glow in the darkness.

I couldn't move or open my eyes (maybe they actually were open here in the blinding darkness), but in my mind I could picture my left hand entwined in Ethan's. I could feel his slightly rough palm on mine and his fingers wrapped around my own. I could smell his clear, fresh scent slowly infusing the suffocating stillness around me, cooling it, and when I searched for his eyes, I found every variation of green I had ever seen in them.

Just like all the other times I had come in contact with Ethan, the burning set out on a quick course up my arm, but unlike the other times, Ethan didn't pull his hand away. I could feel his eyes watching me as the energy spread up my arm, moving to my shoulder and up into my neck. I would have moved away from it if I could have—would have pulled my hand from his—but I was frozen in place. The current wound its way between my ribs, making it difficult to breathe (if I was actually breathing). I fought the tightness in my chest, trying to draw in a breath as the current moved steadily toward my heart. My heart squeezed, flopping in my chest as it tried to escape the energy threatening to consume it.

I couldn't cry out for it to stop. I couldn't move away. I could only wait as the tingling burn crept closer to my heart. And then, suddenly, it was just *there*. My heart zinged into a furious pace, swept away in a tsunami of burning energy. In the instant my heart was engulfed by the current, my body found movement again. Time lurched forward, and my heart stuttered in an uneven beat as I gasped in a deep draught of air. My eyes flew open. After the complete and palpable blackness, the sudden light was blinding. I shut my eyes against the searing pain and turned my face away.

I lay uncomfortably on the hard ground, feeling the rough grass scratching the palm of my hand and the gentle brush of the wind against my face. I felt the pull of my chest as I took several quick breaths, trying to keep pace with the rapid beating of my heart. I was gratefully aware of the air coursing in and out of my lungs. The burning energy continued on its course through my body as if my heart was pumping it through my veins.

I cautiously opened my eyes, squinting against the intensity of the light. I was back in the clearing. I lay listening to the calliope sounds of a bird in a nearby tree wondering how long I had been gone. I tried to sit up only to find my arm pinned to the ground. I turned to see what was holding it down and drew in a sharp breath when I saw Ethan's pale face close to mine. He lay face down beside me with his head and one hand resting on my arm. He was deathly still, and his eyes were closed.

I wrenched my body up off the ground, jerking my arm out from under Ethan's cheek.

Liam was beside me then calling loudly, "Theo, over here! They're back. He found her."

I pushed hard at Ethan's still form and rolled him onto his back. His head lolled to the side like a ragdoll needing repair.

"Ethan?" I said frantically. I waited, praying desperately for some response. Liam and Theo fell to their knees beside Ethan's lifeless body. "Ethan?!" I yelled but my voice came out in a hoarse whisper.

Then Theo was shouting. "Ethan!" Theo grabbed Ethan by the shoulders and shook him hard. No response. His head only jostled back and forth. "Liam, he's not breathing!"

"Liam, what's happening?!" I yelled, turning to Liam.

"He went to get you from *eiliff mors*. He didn't make the shift back."

"No! No! Ethan!" I screamed at him. "You weren't supposed to come get me." I shook my head, my mind refusing to accept what my senses were telling me.

No. No. No!

Ethan still didn't move or breathe. I pressed my ear to his chest, desperate to hear the sound of his heart, but no sound rose up to meet my ear. I put my hand to his cold cheek. I couldn't breathe and my stomach turned as nausea gripped it.

"Elly. Elly! Listen to me!" Liam said urgently. He pulled hard on one of my shoulders and wrenched me away from Ethan, gripping my chin and turning my face so I had to look at him. "Elly, shift him. Take him back to his frequency. Do it now!" I only stared into Liam's pale grey eyes. It took a full second for me to process his words.

"But people can't be shifted," I argued.

"Except you did," Liam insisted. "You shifted Corbett. Do it!"

I thought for a fraction of a second then nodded. I held Ethan's hand in both of mine. I shifted the two of us up again and again; putting all of the energy I could move into the shift, and hopefully, into Ethan's still form.

I knew we weren't in the clearing anymore—the air was suddenly much warmer—but I didn't look around. Everything was silent for a moment, then I heard the muffled *lub dub* of a single, soft heartbeat. The sound was exquisite. The solitary beat was followed by another and then another. The rhythm began slowly then eased into a constant, even pulse. I saw Ethan's chest rise and fall once as he finally choked in a breath of air.

I sat listening to the sound of the steady beating of Ethan's heart. He moaned quietly, and tears of relief slid down my face. Ethan opened his eyes, his disoriented gaze finally meeting mine. I smiled and breathed for what must have been the first time since I had seen Ethan lying on the ground.

He's still here. He's still here.

"Elly," Ethan whispered hoarsely. Even though the sound was rough, it poured over me with a flood of relief, causing another wave of tears to spill over onto my cheeks.

I felt a hand on my shoulder and turned to see Liam drop down on one knee beside me. I looked around for Theo, surprised to find myself on a grassy, open slope that spread down to what appeared to be a castle. A tree stood as a solitary sentry at the top of the hill—the same hill as in Ethan's vision.

"*Aithen!*" Theo called out, suddenly appearing out of nowhere. He fell to his knees on the other side of Ethan. Ethan rolled onto his side with a quiet groan and tried to push himself up. Theo quickly moved to help him.

"What happened?" Ethan asked, still sounding a little groggy. He struggled to his feet, leaning heavily on Theo. Liam stepped over to Ethan, pulling one of Ethan's arms across his

shoulder to support Ethan's weight.

"What do you remember?" Liam asked. Ethan stood on unsteady legs. He drew himself up with some effort and pulled his arm off Liam's shoulder. Liam cast him a worried frown and Ethan nodded reassuringly.

Ethan drew one hand down over his eyes before raking it through his hair—a movement that was both mundane and so reassuringly familiar. "I remember the fight and Elly disappearing," he said. "I remember taking out Delano. That's all." He stopped and truly looked at me then, his eyes returning to a clear blue as though a cloud had lifted. "You're safe," he said, relief evident in his voice. I nodded.

"I shifted Corbett to *eiliff mors*. You came to get me. Thank you," I ended feebly.

"*Eiliff mors?!*" Ethan asked disbelievingly. His brow furrowed in concentration. "Wait, I remember picking up your sword and going to get you. I don't remember coming back ...," Ethan said as he studied me quizzically.

"You didn't," Theo interjected. His chin quivered once. "You didn't make the shift back. Elly brought you the rest of the way. *I'chi naen wen Ic helt.*" Theo's face crumpled and his jaw clenched, but he stopped short of crying. Ethan pulled Theo closer in a brief embrace.

"I'm sorry, Theo. I'm sorry. I'm here now. I'm all right." Ethan let go of Theo who turned and studied the ground, giving a stiff nod. Ethan gave his shoulder a squeeze.

"Wait," Ethan said. "Elly brought me back? How?" He looked at me, his brow creased. He reached over placing his hand on my cheek. He wiped my tears away with his thumb. That only brought on more tears as I leaned my cheek into his hand. "Don't cry, Elly. It's all right. How did you bring me back?"

I sucked in a ragged breath, trying to get my voice under control so I could answer, but my throat felt tight and my words came out raspy. "Liam told me to shift you back to your frequency so I did."

He smiled at me, then lowered his hand from my face and looked around for the first time. "You shifted me home? We're in cian time?" Liam nodded. Ethan's face sobered and he contemplated Liam for a time. "We finished it, didn't we? It's over?" he asked quietly.

"It's done," Liam said, turning somber and watching Ethan closely. "Delano is dead and Corbett is ... well, *gone* anyway."

Ethan closed his eyes. His head bowed and his shoulders slumped. He grimaced. He took a deep breath then and made an effort to square his shoulders. He didn't entirely succeed. Ethan turned to me, his eyes darkening to a sapphire blue. He watched me carefully for a moment.

"I'm sorry I didn't listen to you, Elly," he said quietly. "You were right. This didn't go well. Thank you for saving my life and bringing me home. I owe you a great deal."

"You don't owe me anything. I'm the one who made it all go wrong. You trusted me and I did the very thing you told me not to do." I looked down, unable to meet his gaze.

"You sacrificed yourself to save us all. That can hardly be considered the wrong thing to do." Ethan paused, taking a breath. "I owe you more than you know, Elly. I've done what I can for you. I believe you will be safe. You need to return to human time now. It has been my great privilege to know you. Good bye, Elly."

My heart lurched into a gallop and my head snapped up. I saw Ethan's eyes darken and his jaw tighten. Ethan watched me closely as I stood, replaying his words in my head and trying to attach some meaning to them. My heart pounded, sending bitter panic coursing through my veins.

"But I can stay with you. I want to stay with you," I said, my words coming out in a rush.

“No, you can’t stay in my frequency any more than I could stay in yours,” Ethan said, shaking his head. “You need to go home.” He turned to Theo and nodded twice. Theo stepped closer to Ethan. He slipped under Ethan’s arm to support him as they both turned and began to walk away.

I watched in stunned silence as they moved away slowly, Ethan leaning heavily on Theo and taking uneven steps. It was like watching the doors of an elevator slowly slide shut, knowing I would be trapped inside with my claustrophobia.

No! Don’t let him do this!

This was worse than the dread that stalked me in my sleep. Worse than the chaeli. Worse than the deathly dark of my nightmare. Worse than all of our bad decisions put together. Fear gripped me and it took me a full two seconds to break loose and make my body move.

“Wait!” I called, running to catch up with Ethan.

I stepped in front of him to block his path, forcing him to stop. Theo gave me a hard look and tried to move Ethan past me, but I stayed in front of them. Ethan pulled his arm off Theo’s shoulder and turned to me. I stood, shaking my head quickly.

“I’m sorry I made a mess of everything,” I said, desperation colouring my words. “I’m sorry things went so wrong. Please don’t send me home,” I begged. Ethan grimaced.

“This has nothing to do with what you did in the battle,” he said soberly. “You can’t stay here. You will die here.”

“But this is *wrong*. You can’t do this.” I gasped in a few quick, shallow breaths. I couldn’t seem to pull any air into my lungs. “You don’t understand. I *have* to stay. It’s wrong for me to leave.” Ethan’s mouth tightened and his jaw flexed. He angled his head away from me, taking a deep breath, then turned back to me, his midnight blue eyes meeting mine.

“Right or wrong, you will return to your own frequency,” he ordered. His tone was less forceful when he spoke again. “I ... don’t want you here.”

“But I thought ... I thought you cared for me. Do you *want* me to leave?” I asked disbelievingly, barely able to say the words out loud for fear of making them true.

Ethan was silent for a second. He clenched his jaw as a look of distaste fell across his features. He drew in a deep breath.

“Yes,” he said tersely, “I want you to leave.” He pressed his mouth into a line and looked down. “I ... I don’t want you to stay with me.”

My mind recoiled from his words. “You don’t mean that,” I whispered, shaking my head.

“I want you to go home. Now,” Ethan replied tonelessly.

He tried to step around me, but his movements were too slow without Theo’s help, and I stepped with him, staying in his path.

“No,” I insisted. “You’re just saying that to keep me safe. You can’t do this. I’m telling you it’s wrong. You have to listen to me this time. Please let me stay. Please don’t leave me,” I begged, knowing full well how pathetic it was, but I was desperate.

Ethan’s face went blank and he shook his head. His voice was well controlled when he spoke and he looked at me with ice-water eyes.

“No, Elly. I’m sorry if you misunderstood the situation. I never intended for you to follow me home. I did my job. I’m finished. I’m returning to my life and you will return to yours,” he said with a measured authority. “Liam!”

Liam was immediately behind me. He gently gripped my arm while Theo stepped over to help Ethan.

“Come on Elly,” Liam said quietly. “It’s not safe for you to be here.”

I didn't look at Liam. I shook his hand off my arm and took a step toward Ethan.

"You won't let me stay no matter what I say, will you?" I asked heatedly.

Ethan glanced over his shoulder, meeting my gaze for the briefest of moments. He said nothing—only turned and continued slowly down the slope.

So this is how it will end?

I squared my shoulders and raised my chin. I spoke calmly calling after him: "Fine. If that's what you want, I'll leave. But I'm telling you now this isn't right. This will end as badly as the battle—or worse. It" I couldn't hold on to the end. Tears spilled down my face and my throat tightened so I couldn't speak.

"Go home, Elly," Ethan called back over his shoulder as he and Theo slowly made their way down the slope. I stood for a moment, Liam close behind me. There was no point chasing after him—Liam would stop me if I tried.

I could only bear to watch Ethan's retreating form for a second or two before I lost my tenuous hold on self-control. I buried my face in my hands and turned, leaning into Liam's chest, tears running down my face. I tried to stay quiet—tried not to sob, but I didn't succeed. Liam hesitated for a long moment before he folded his arms around me. He let me cry, saying nothing while I sobbed.

I wanted to turn to have one last look at Ethan, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. I shifted down, back to human time, taking Liam with me. The last sound I heard before leaving cian time was Ethan's uneven heartbeat.

Liam and I stood silently until my tears slowed and the sobs racking my body eased. I took a ragged breath and straightened up. Liam let me go, ducking his head to peer down at my tear stained face. I swiped at the tears with the tips of my fingers only to have more fall to replace them. Liam reached over, ripped off a piece of his t-shirt from his sleeve, and wiped away the last of my tears with it.

I took a deep breath and surveyed the area. We were back in the clearing. The light was beginning to fade, but I could still make out the darkened patches of crumbling chaeli remains that spotted the field.

"They're dead? It's really over?" I asked dully.

"They're dead. It's done."

I looked up at Liam and suddenly felt very cold. A tsunami of exhaustion collapsed in on me. I was drowning in darkness and cold, staring out through a tunnel that was slowly collapsing in on the remaining circle of light. I tried to reach out to Liam as the pitch-black undertow pulled me down.

"Liam ... I"

The last thing I saw was the drowning man in Liam's eyes staring down at me.

Epilogue

The tall shadow of a man moved silently, letting the inky darkness of the room drape comfortably around him. He stopped beside the bed, hovering there like a sentinel and watching the sleeping girl who lay meandering through the oblivion of sleep.

The girl rolled onto her side with a quiet whimper. The man slowly lowered himself to perch tentatively on the edge of the bed, his feet submerged in the pool of shadow on the floor. He stretched out a hand, hesitated, then let one finger glide along the yielding firmness of the girl's cheek. The girl sighed quietly and was still again.

The man's finger moved to the girl's hair, almost not touching its dark silky length. He picked up a wavy strand, letting it wrap around one finger like a vine climbing a trellis. He stroked its softness with his thumb until he could no longer feel it then released the coffee-coloured strand.

The man sat without moving, savouring the desolate ache that burned in his chest as he silently watched the girl through the long, still night.

About The Author

Wendy Fehr is a wife, a mother of four, and a health care professional. She took up writing as a creative outlet during her “spare time”, exploring ideas about time, finding one’s place, and good and evil. What began as stories she told her children eventually formed the basis for the stories captured in the **Shifters Series**.

The characters, themes and story arcs that we are introduced to in Horizons, the first book in the Shifters Series, are carried through Winding Roads and Coming Home, the second and third installments of the series. All titles are published by Shifterspress, an independent publisher, and are available in print and all popular eBook formats.

You can read more about Wendy at shifterspress.ca.

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