

# The String Bearer

*Lord of the Strings*

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## *Dedication*

Tigger, Puppy, Zak, Chaffie, Riffa, Hershey and all my four legged friends who have passed through that final doorway that we can't see beyond. I know you're all waiting for me on the other side and are standing at the side of my two-legged friends and family. I love you all still. If Heaven is without our animal companions, what kind of Heaven could it be?

*For want of a nail, a shoe was lost.  
For want of a shoe, a horse was lost.  
For want of a horse, the rider was lost.  
For want of a rider, the message was lost.  
For want of a message, the kingdom was lost.  
All because of a nail.*

## *Chapter 1*

Arlen James crept close to the wall of the abandoned warehouse glad that his partner was on the opposite side of the corridor. The smell coming off the masses of garbage and human excrement was enough to make his eyes water even under the mask and face shield. He couldn't believe any human being could live in this place and not vomit from the eye burning-stomach turning

miasma that wafted through, no, blasted down these narrow hallways in what used to be a chipped wood furniture factory.

He remembered the place when it had been a thriving, busy 24/7 business, run by local managers and with a work staff of illegal aliens busted by Immigration and shut down years ago because of labor strikes and cheap competition from overseas.

Now, crack addicts and meth dealers used it to produce product or crash until they found other accommodations. He was there at least twice a month, rousting trespassers, finding dead bodies and vagrants, watching deals go down or confiscating paraphernalia from growers.

Murphy glanced over at him, gave him a thumbs up and together they slid out of the hallway into the huge warehouse open on all sides but broken up into smaller spaces by the huge machines left bolted in place too large to move, too old to salvage. The company had left them to time and scavengers.

Murphy nodded, knowing he meant the section where massive springs were all that remained of a paper rolling press that had made laminated chipboards. It held overhead catwalks and was a favorite place for junkies to watch for intruders.

They separated, two serious men dressed in SWAT gear moving like ghosts in the dim building. Twenty minutes later, the entire team reassembled after checking all the local hangouts and found no evidence of any drugs.

The team of six pulled open their face gear and made ribald comments over the busted raid, swore to take it out on their CI for the bum lead.

“Hey,” one said. “Where’s AJ?”

They counted heads, came up one team member short so the Sergeant spoke into his collar and called.

“Arlen? AJ, where the hell are you?”

Static came back and then his voice on the radio. “Sarge, you better come back here.”

“Here where, AJ?” he returned.

“Call... meat wagon... Services,” his voice broke up. “... in the... pit... bodies.”

The entire team hiked up their gear and returned inside to the area where furniture was sprayed, where a pit built like a service bay oil change was tucked into the corner of a lonely warehouse set off to the side and away from the rest of the facility. Partially open to the sky, it was not an area well-traveled or used by transients.

Arlen was standing at the top and staring down in the hole as if the sight mesmerized him.

“What’s up, AJ?” They peered over and their eyes widened. On the concrete lay, a woman dressed in a gown of such beauty that it almost overshadowed her own stunning elegance. She was tall with a figure straight out of every man’s fantasy, with long chestnut hair and green eyes now occluded with death. Her mouth was slightly parted as if she had just taken a breath. Her chest had a hole blown clear through it and blood stained the concrete; covered a small child who sat tucked into her right arm. He sat quietly, a dazed expression on his face; his eyes were huge, two luminous green globes that glowed in the depths of the pit like a wild nocturnal animal. His hair was a riotous mix of curls and he must have rolled in the dust because it was a curious shade of rusty gray. Around both of them was a pile of brass, cartridge shells and Arlen’s professional eye marked them as 9 mm and 40 caliber. He laid his weapon on the edge and lightly jumped down into the pit, talking softly and non-stop to the child. He did not bother to check the woman; with holes that size in her chest, she could not possibly be alive.

He touched the baby, skin cold but alive and when he/she felt a warm, ungloved hand, it turned its head and screamed. Arlen picked up the baby, noted that it was a boy and cradled him close into his vest so that the child could hear his heartbeat.

“What’s your name, honey?” he asked as the boy looked at him briefly before sticking his thumb in his mouth. He looked to be about thirteen months but no more than that.

“Any ID on her, Arlen?” Sarge asked and joined him. He slid his hands under her body and searched efficiently without disturbing any of the crime scenes. He found no purse, no ID, not even a diaper bag. He did find a coin under her body of solid gold with a curious stone imbedded in the center that matched the exact color of their eyes. There was no writing on it, nothing stamped on either side.

The woman was not wearing shoes or any underwear, just a thin slip made of a translucent material that he had never seen before. The boy wore a sodden brief made not of disposable diaper but a cloth wrapped into a cunning package. His clothing was a soft, woolen like jumper, which covered his palms, feet and neck. It was an opalescent color, shifting from pearl to blue, pink, yellow and back.

The boy did not answer him but looked at his mother and cried slow tears that glistened as they slid down his chubby cheeks.

“AJ, get him outta here,” the Sarge ordered. “No point in letting him see his mom like that.”

The woman’s eyes opened and she turned her head to the utter astonishment of the two in the pit. “Save him,” she spoke with a strange accent. “Don’t let them take him. Protect...”

“Holy Christ!” Arlen gasped. “She’s alive! Get medical here!”

“Ma’am,” the sergeant knelt at her side and held her hand. “What’s your name, Ma’am? Stay with us, help is on the way. Do you know who shot you? What’s your boy’s name?”

“Too late,” she breathed. “Jadewyn. He’s called Jadewyn.” She looked at the SWAT man holding the boy, whispered with her dying effort, “Take him. Hide him. They’ll kill him.” Her eyes closed, her chest heaved once and she was gone.

“Holy shit,” he said inelegantly. “Who could live with holes like that?” he squeezed the coin in his hand and climbed back out. “Cancel the code, make it a 10-85,” he added and took the child from AJ as he climbed up. “Call Social Services to meet us at the station.”

“Sarge,” AJ stated.

“What?”

“Let me take him home.” It was said quietly and firmly, hung out there like dirty laundry.

“AJ, he’s a murder victim’s child. He must have family.”

“Whoever killed her will be looking for him, Sarge. You heard her. Franny can’t have kids and they won’t let us adopt. Let me take him home.”

The Sergeant hesitated, looked at the other team members who shrugged and pointed in disbelief as the woman’s corpse began to glow. They watched it burn, turn into a million fireflies and disappear in a cloud of sparks. Only then did the child speak. He said, “Eloahim, Madaras.”

## Chapter 2

“AJ, have you seen my wallet? I lost it, put it down somewhere and now I can’t find it,” the woman’s voice rose over the TV. The SWAT member set the five year old on his feet to get up and start looking in all the obvious places a woman might accidentally leave her personal possessions. The boy went to the vegetable bin that held carrots, onions and potatoes and pulled it open to expose her purse.

“Found it!” the man called and she came into the kitchen to stare at the little boy and his father.

“This is so strange, AJ,” she said. “Watch this---Jeddy boy, where’s Mama’s blue ring?” AJ said, “The one you lost two years ago?”

She nodded and they followed as he took them on a tour of the house to the garage and into the car where he pushed the seat back. In the track lay a one-carat blue topaz and gold ring that glittered in his palm. AJ looked at the boy’s clear bottle green eyes and then at his mama’s blue ones.

“Jade, where’s my Cross pocket knife?”

The strange gray brows furrowed, closed his eyes in thought and skittered out to the yard. There on the massive deck between two cracks, he dug out the slim blade and handed it over to his father.

“No matter what I ask him to find, he finds it,” she told her husband. “Stuff I haven’t thought of in years.”

“Lost socks, too?” he quipped.

“You can make fun of it, AJ, but I haven’t been able to stump him yet,” she retorted. “Take him to the station and try it with some of the guys there.”

“I just might,” he returned. “Jade, want to go with Dad to work?”

The boy looked up at his dad and nodded. From the day that Arlen had brought the toddler home to his wife, the child had rarely spoken and when he did, he had the same strange accent as his mother.

His hair had not been dirty from dust but was an odd dark gray, uniformly one color, an ashy tone that looked odd on so young a child.

Franny James had taken the exhausted baby from her husband, bathed and fed him, rocked him to sleep in her arms. In the next week, she took him to a PEDS clinic and had him examined from head to toe, paid cash so that there was no paper trail on the boy.

For three years, almost four, they had raised him and not one of his team ratted him out. In fact, the boy called Jade had seven uncles that doted on him.

Franny had dressed him in jeans, camo t-shirt and put his hand in AJ’s, kissed him goodbye and waved as they drove out in his 4x4 Dodge pickup.

The station was a twenty-minute drive down the highway and into Boston proper. AJ’s station was the 4-7, home of the top SWAT TacOps and counter terrorism of which he was a senior member.

He pulled into his space, parked and unhooked Jadewyn from his car seat and put him down on the concrete. The two of them sauntered into the station house like marching soldiers.

“Hey, AJ. Jade,” the desk sergeant smiled. “You on?”

“Nope, Reilly. Got the next two off,” he said genially.

“Hey, did you hear about Rosslyn’s daughter?”

“Mayor Rosslyn? No, what?”

“She’s been missing for twelve hours; they’re waiting for a ransom demand.”

AJ looked at his son, and then back to his Sergeant. “They know where she disappeared from?”

“Somewhere on BU’s campus.”

“Got a map, Sarge? Bring it into the Loo’s office. Is Murph here? Bring him, too.” James dragged his child into the Lieutenant’s office without knocking; he was on the phone and looked

up in astonishment that he was interrupted without a knock or fare-thee-well. Hanging up, he glared at his off duty SWAT member and demanded to know what James was doing.

The desk sergeant came in with a map and paused at the desk, confused.

“Put it out on the desk, Sarge,” AJ ordered and picked Jade up. He stared into those odd, large pupils. “Jade? Loo, you got a photo of Rosslyn’s daughter?”

“Yeah. On the board.” He pointed to the eraser board with the current cases listed. On the top of the board was Melissa Rosslyn, missing, the date, place and time.

“What is this about, AJ?” the Loo demanded as he handed over the photos. AJ gave it to the boy.

“Jade, this pretty lady is Melissa. She’s lost. Can you find her?”

The boy took the photo, stood still in a way that was eerily adult and headed for the door. AJ stopped him. “No, Jade. Show me on the map, can you do that?”

He looked, peered down at the metroplex map spread out on the desk and pointed to the streets Maidenhair and Culver, part of the Commons near the University. “What’s there? Can you pull up a Google Earth view of the area, down to the buildings?” AJ asked. Such was his intensity that the lieutenant nodded and turned his monitor around after he downloaded the sight. The 17 in monitor showed labs, power plant and the horticulture building on the university complex. Jade pointed to that building, to a specific location and said, “Under.”

“This is bullshit, AJ,” he said and AJ, the Sarge and a voice from the door denied it. Murphy came in wearing his work suit, chinos, sport jacket, polo and 9 mm.

“Loo, if Jade says it’s there, it’s there. What’s up, AJ?” His eyes scanned the maps, the girl’s photo and the board.

“Melissa Rosslyn? He’s found her? Jade, is she alive?”

“Murph! He’s only five years old!”

“Sorry, partner.” He laid his hand on the boy’s skinny shoulder. “Loo, Jade has been finding stuff for us the last four years. I swear if he says she’s there, you can bank on it.”

“Yeah? Ask him where my wife lost her grandmother’s diamond out of the setting?”

Jade looked up at him sideways, said in a soft, lisping whisper, “Light over your hallway. In the cover.”

“Right,” he snorted, then, “How’s he know I have a covered light in the hall?” He picked up the phone, stared at those green eyes as they stared back. He dialed. “Hi, Cappy. Look, do me a favor, will you? Get the ladder, go take off the cover on the hall light and look inside it. No, I didn’t see any flies in there and I know you changed the bulbs four months ago. I’ll wait.”

Ten minutes later, they all heard her shriek, “I found it! Mimi’s stone! I must have hit the setting and knocked it loose!”

He hung up slowly. “AJ, if he’s wrong, I’ll look like a fool.”

“If he’s right, the mayor will owe you big time.”

“Murphy, Sergeant, get my car and we’ll check it out ourselves,” he decided. “Take him with us, AJ.”

“Loo, what if she’s---”

“Keep him in the cruiser. Have paramedics standing by.”

All eyes were on them as the unlikely four descended to the car pool. They found her, buried in the compost pile in the greenhouses of the Horticulture Department. She had been raped and strangled; they managed to keep the sight from the child but he knew the outcome regardless. She must have just been placed there, the paramedics were able to revive her and the mayor met the boy and kept his secret.

### Chapter 3

My dad had retired from SWAT, he'd gotten too old and too slow to continue with the gung-ho group of dudes; had transferred to the detective division of homicide. He had an impressive solve rate and only a few knew I was his secret weapon. Of course, it wasn't so secret, all of the 4-7 knew I could find anything lost and return it to its owner.

I had just turned 15, just had a birthday and been gifted with new clothes, a laptop and a small motor bike. I had to swear I'd wear a brain bucket or Dad would take it back.

What I didn't want on my birthday was the talk my mom and dad gave me. Not that talk. I had never wondered why my eyes were green and not blue like theirs or why my hair was not brown or black, or that I stood a head taller than my Dad did. I had not remembered being found by the team next to my dead mother nor realized I was adopted. It had left me stunned and adrift.

"She said your name. Jadewyn. I looked on the Internet and found nothing, Jade, nor the words you spoke, 'Eleohim Madaras.' The closest I could come was 'Elohim'. God's Angels." He told me how my mother's body had disappeared and some of the answers he'd come up with to explain the oddities about the both of us. There weren't many or believable.

"We didn't tell anyone where or how we got you, Jade. Except for the Team. The guys were there, they know."

"You never tried to track her down or me?"

"We tried. I couldn't find anything on her or you. No DNA, no fingerprints, no missing persons. Your mother's clothes were unique and different. Sarge found a coin under her. We had it appraised. It was gold with a gemstone in the center of it. I thought it was an emerald but the experts said it only looks like one, like the coin looks like gold but is something more, something not of this...world."

"What---you're saying I'm an...alien? Come on, Dad, you know me, raised me for thirteen years. You've seen me bleed red blood, get sick with the flu, break bones. You know I'm just a kid," I protested.

"Jade---your eyes, your hair, and the way you find anything that's lost---it's not...normal."

I stared at him in horror. "Are you afraid of me, Dad?"

He rushed forward and hugged me. "NO! Never that, Jade! I'm afraid for you. If certain people find out about your...trick, they'd steal you away from us. So far, no one but the team knows what you can do and most of the missing people you've found were in my name. They think I have a knack for it...or well-placed CIs."

"You do have an impressive array of snitches, Dad."

"We wanted you, Jade. I wanted you from the second I saw your eyes," he said quietly. "And your mom and I have never regretted it for a minute."

He handed me a coin and I stared at the gold piece in my palm. An emerald the size of a dime gleamed up at me. "It's worth a lot of money, Jade. The stone is three times harder than a diamond; it will cut a diamond or steel. The gold or whatever it is will not burn, melt or scratch. It weighs more than it should and less than it seems. It won't X-ray, bounces light off it and absorbs energy. It glows in the dark and weirder---" He picked it up out of my hand and threw it as hard as he could. My eye tracked its trajectory and saw the thing fly out the window yet when I looked again, my palm stung and it was plainly sitting on my red flesh.

I closed my fingers on it and pressed the stone. Instantly, flares of light escaped from between my clenched hand and sparkled greenly around me to form a column hovering over us. Dad stepped to my shoulder and gripped it as a beautiful woman dressed in a transparent gown

of light stood before us. I was reminded of the princess from Star Wars except that there was no droid, no Han Solo and I wasn't Luke Skywalker.

"That's your mother," my dad said.

"Ya think? It's a hologram," I opened my palm and the thing spoke. In a language I did not understand save for my name. JADEWYN.

"It never did that before," Dad answered my unasked question.

"I have a feeling it only does when I touch it. Do you understand any of the words?"

"No. Smitty is a language buff. He might know," he named one of his old teammates from SWAT.

"I'm going to head downtown to the library, check it out."

"What about the Internet?"

"I don't think it's a good idea. Too many spies cruise the net checking out weird stuff. Nobody goes to the library for research anymore. It's quiet and safe."

"You need a ride? I would prefer you don't take your bike."

"Dad, I'll be careful," I smiled. "I'll wear the brain bucket, I mean helmet. Hey, you've given me a mystery with a lost item I can finally sink my teeth into."

"Yeah? What?"

"Me." I left him there, tucked the coin or whatever it was into my jean pocket. My bike was a small 250cc Vespa but I'd souped it up so it had more than enough kick for my neighborhood. I might not be able to race with the Harleys but I could hold my own with the Hondas and crotch rockets. We did some biking out along the swamp where people dumped garbage.

The library was a branch office in the town where I lived; a massive three-story brick building fashioned in the early 1800s with columns and Federal pergolas, a broad marble colonnade of steps inside. I always wanted to salute and march at attention when I climbed them.

A flag slapped at the pole on my left as a stiff breeze played with it. I heard the metal grommets chime against the aluminum of the forty-foot pole.

The doors pushed open with a slight hiss as if the air inside was not only rarefied but also pressurized and I entered into a world of dreams, fantasies and imagination only as limited as my own.

I hadn't told my Dad the entire truth; I had surfed the Net for info on stuff I wasn't supposed to know about---like the Melissa Rosslyn case 13 years ago and others but I had used the library's computers and not my own. I had an entire Internet identity where I explored strange phenomenon ranging from fish falling out of the sky to Bigfoot roaming the Northwest.

I had been plagued by dreams of the hologram woman and spent the last few months searching for mention of her or the words I had spoken to her years ago. I had not found any news of her death in the papers or in the police reports at my Dad's station house. It was if neither of us existed.

I headed now for the carrels where the public terminals were and had to wait until one was free, swiped my library card and entered the system. My e-mail was filled with 142 unread mails and I deleted all but four. All the others were spam or junk mail offers, the four were from net friends overseas who reported weird sightings for me from their own networks.

SPAWN wrote that he'd lost his virginity and would I please help him find it. I didn't bother to reply other than a generic FU.

*Just found out today I'm adopted. My Dad found me next to my dead mother at a drug dump. Said she blew up like one of those vampire movies---you know---when sunlight hits them.*

*I'm not even legally adopted; he brought me here, kept me. Suppose I should be glad, he kept me from BPS and foster care. He gave me something my real mom had---some kind of weird coin that is a hologram. My mom is on it, she speaks. Says some weird language. Words like Eloahim, Tizmat, and Arytlgeaddon. My name. Any ideas? Arrow.*

I sent it to all my contacts and went back to the research department to pull out several old books on archaic languages. One of them was so old the pages crinkled and I was afraid they might disintegrate with my touch.

Under ancient Hebrew, I found the word 'Elohim' from ancient Sanskrit meaning messengers from the Almighty. It went on to state that the Almighty did not necessarily mean 'God' as in Christian text but a mighty Being that preceded Aramaic Jehovah and was thought to be the beginnings of all creation. Funny, I thought God had created the universe or at least the Big Bang before.

My cell phone was in my pocket, I had put it there on vibrate so no ringing would disturb the sacrosanct silence of the library. When it went off, it startled me and I flipped it open when I saw my Dad's cell number.

"Jade? Where are you?"

I hid in the back of the stacks where no one could hear me. "Library." I looked up. "Research 976.5 through 998.8. 'The Strange Sexual Practices of the Somali Tribe of New Guinea'."

"Ha-ha, Jade. Don't come back here. Go someplace." He hung up and I stared at the phone.

## Chapter 4

Some Place was a cop hangout, a bar that let me in because I was AJ's boy. I parked the bike in the alley by the dumpster and slipped into the back by the delivery entrance. The kitchen was going full tilt, it was Wing Nite and the place was crowded.

"Hey, Jade," Wheeny greeted. He was retired Boston Vice who'd bought the bar and ran it like a deli. "Your dad here for Parmesan Garlic?" Dad was a legend for the number of wings he could put away. I shrugged.

"Sent me a message to meet here."

"What's up?"

"Don't know."

"Grab a plate. Help yourself." He thrust a china plate into my hands and scooped out a sampling of wings, Honey Barbecue, Garlic Parmesan and Buffalo. "Thanks," I found a corner that wasn't underfoot and went to town on the pile until nothing was left but a tower of bones.

Murphy poked his head into the kitchen, saw me and gestured. I followed him out to the taproom and was greeted by his old team.

"Where's Dad?" I looked around. Their faces were flat, grim and my heart sank. "No," I shook my head, denied it. "NO! Where's my dad?"

"You need to come with us, Jade."

"Where? Take me to Dad. Mom?"

"Where have you been, Jade?" Murphy asked me. I turned to him.

"The library. I was at the library. Dad called me, told me to meet him Some Place. I came right away."

"What time did you get to the library?"

"Why? What's this about, Murphy?"

"There's a warrant out for you, Jade. You shot your Mom and Dad and ran."



I fell to the floor, my face white, screamed denials, clawed my way up and tried to run for home. Many hands grabbed me.

“Jade, we know you didn’t do it,” he said urgently. “I need to swab your hands to prove it.”

I held them out. “Test me, polygraph me. I didn’t kill my father or my mother! My library card was swiped at the south side branch. It’s time stamped when I entered and when I left. I can prove I haven’t been home since 7am this morning when I left for school.”

“You need to come with us, Jade. We’ll hide you until we get to the bottom of this.”

“Who says I did it? Who found them?”

“Homicide from the 672. Someone called it in as a domestic disturbance. Anonymous tip.”

“Why me?” Murphy pushed me out the back door surrounded by Dad’s buddies. I felt confused, terrified, and adrift even surrounded by the most macho bunch of dudes with whom I’d ever been.

They hustled me into a dark car crammed with gear and settled around me, took off onto I95 and headed out of town towards the border.

“Where are we going?” I asked trying to make room for my shoulders. I was squished between Murphy, Reilly, Denato and Jalvers were up front, and Pierce was driving.

“Vonage’s cabin in the Berkshires,” Murphy answered.

“Tell me what happened, Murphy.”

He glanced at me and then away. “They sent a black and white. Found your dad with a bullet in the back of his head. Your mom was shot once. In the head, too. Your schoolbooks were on the table with drugs inside. And money. Over \$5000. Implications were you are a dealer, they found out and you shot them.”

“With what?”

“Your dad’s Sig Sauer.”

“It wasn’t me.”

“I know that, Jade. It’s got to be someone with a grudge or---”

“Or what?” I asked.

“Or it’s about what you can do.”

“I’ve been doing it for 13 years, Murphy,” I returned. “Why now?”

“There’s an article in the Times about you, Jade,” said the Sarge, Reilly. “Came out two days ago. Doesn’t mention you by name but it’s got enough detail to mark AJ and you if you dig a little. And someone dug. The FBI had agents at two of the precincts and they sent them to the 4-7, dug through reports and came up with AJ’s name, solve rate, and started asking a round about him and you.”

“About me?”

“Where did you come from? Where were you born? Who knew you before you just appeared at AJ’s,” Murph answered.

“Did you know I was...adopted?”

“We were all there, Jade. We saw your mom. You.”

“What will they do to them, to Mom and Dad?”

“Take them to the morgue, do autopsies, release the bodies for a funeral.”

“I have to see them, to say goodbye, Murphy. I have to be there.”

“They’ll be expecting that.”

“They who? Let me out!” I reached over and tried to open the door but they pulled me back and held me. I tried kicking and screaming yet couldn’t move an inch until finally, one of them put me in a chokehold and held me until I passed out.

I rolled over in a bed that smelled funny. Like it had been stored in a basement---sort of musty and cold. The sheets were flannel with moose on them and matched the bedroom and curtains. The room was done in knotty pine, the furniture rustic, like an old cabin. I saw rifles mounted on the walls out through the open door. Bars closed off the windows, screwed into the wood with lag bolts. I tried to get up and made it as far as my feet on the floor but my shoulders wouldn’t move. I jerked; found my wrist was handcuffed to the headboard.

“Hey! Anybody here? Hello?”

Murphy came around the corner, and stuck his head in the room. He had changed out of his uniform and wore jeans, flannel shirt and down vest. His issue pistol was on his hip. “Sorry about your head. You were hysterical, had to calm you down. How do you feel?”

I jerked the chain. “Let me go.”

“Can’t. Not until you promise not to do anything stupid.”

“Like what?” I said bitterly. “I don’t know where I am or how I got here. I don’t have any money or---” I felt in my pockets but my cell phone was gone, too. “Where is everybody?”

“Dropped the team off when we got to Worcester. Reilly took everyone home but me.”

“My Dad?”

“Cap’n is planning their funeral. He had no other family but you. And us.”

I swallowed. “They still think I did it?”

Slowly, he nodded. “BOLO out for you, warrants and VRT Team. FBI has agents looking for you, too. Guys in suits with sunglasses, blacked out SUVs and shiny badges.”

“Men in black?”

“We used to be the men in black, Jade. Are you hungry? How’s your head?”

I did have a headache and a sore throat. “I’m thirsty. Got anything?” I sat on the edge of the bed and eased the ache in my shoulder.

“Water, soda, Mike’s and beer. I don’t recommend the beer on top of a headache and getting drunk is not a smart option right now.”

“What am I going to do, Murph?”

He hesitated. “First thing, we have to find out why AJ and Franny were killed, Jade and why you were fingered for it.”

“I was at the library, looking up stuff about me on the Internet. Do you think I called them down on mom and dad?”

“No, Jade. You’re not responsible for this. Don’t blame yourself. It was the bastard who leaked the story to the papers.” He walked away, came back with a glass of Coke and two Tylenol. I took them, lay back down on the bed, and wallowed in self-pity.

## **Chapter 5**

He un-cuffed me at suppertime, brought me out to the kitchen and I sat at the table to pick at what was obviously canned chili. “Chili, Murphy? You trying to bomb me out of here?” It was a well-known fact that chili and farts went hand in hand.

“Sorry. Didn’t have time to stock the pantry,” he retorted.

“Couldn’t you go fishing or something?” I noted the fishing poles as well as the hunting rifles.

“This is Vonage’s cabin, Jade. I’ve never been here before. We’re in the Berkshires, place called Cat Mountain. Nearest town is 24 miles away, nearest store is a little convenience

place 12 miles down a trail and dirt road. Only way in is 4 wheel drive and then a two mile hike.”

“Must be fun to get the mail. Where’s the power come from?”

“Kerosene lamps. Wood stove. Gas oven. All carried in. Water comes from a hand pumped well, toilet is an outhouse, and shower is solar heated. No electricity, no cell phone coverage. You’re really roughing it out here.”

“What if one of us gets hurt?”

“Don’t. I have a first aid kit and standard SWAT Medic training.”

“Can I go outside?”

“You’re not a prisoner, Jade. Just don’t get lost. There are thousands of acres out there, wolves, bears, coyotes and mountain lions. Also, cliffs, sinkholes, caves and escarpments.”

“I find lost things, remember?” I said sourly. “I don’t get lost.”

“Yeah? Which way is home?”

I paused, went inside myself to that place where I always knew the answers and direction, pointed southeast towards the string I had put on my dad. It tugged, pulled at me with an urgency I could not resist. I came back and Murphy was staring at my eyes, his hand on my chin.

“Your eyes got huge, Jade. All pupil, big green wolf eyes.”

“Dad’s alive,” I stated. “We have to go back and get him.”

“Are you sure? The Officers who found the bodies said he was shot in the head.”

“It wasn’t him,” I insisted. “Look, there’s a string attached to everything I search for. I can find it, pull it towards me, sense it and follow it anywhere. My Dad’s string is stretched thin but it’s not broken or cut. And I can find them even when they are cut. Dead.”

“Where is he?”

“Far. Far from here.” I reached out my hand and pulled on it, made it jangle. “South. Do you have a map of the South?”

We tore the place apart, found a Rand McNally Atlas and opened it to the Southern part of the country; I put my hand on Washington, DC.

“The Pentagon? He’s in the Pentagon? Who’s after you, Jade?”

“I don’t know. I just know we have to find my Dad.”

“Franny?”

I hesitated, looked for her and found her string frayed and shredded, knew she was gone and where they had taken her body. My eyes filled with tears and I sobbed. “I never got to tell her how much I loved her.”

He held me, let me cry myself out until exhausted, I fell asleep in the armchair in front of the fireplace. He had packed what little was in the cabin; given me clean clothes from the owner’s closet. “Your dad took you for target shooting, right?” He held out a spare pistol and gingerly, I put my hand on it, pushed it back to him.

“No. I’m not taking that, Murphy. Just this.” I dug through my pockets and pulled out the gold coin Dad had given me less than 48 hours ago. His eyes widened.

“I saw that when we found your mother. AJ had it all this time?”

“Yeah. He gave it to me on my B-day. Told me I was adopted. That’s when all this started. After I downloaded an image onto the Net and asked if anyone knew what it was.”

“Let’s go. We have a hike to the SUV.” He was silent on the trek back. Bugs ate me as if I was sugar. I spent so much time and energy swatting at flies, mosquitoes and gnats that I was covered in blood and that brought more. I had tried to cover myself with bug spray yet the critters ignored it. Not a one bit Murphy.

Once at the SUV, I climbed in, shut the windows and wiped blood and bug guts off me. The itching started and drove me insane until he pulled over and dug through his med kit to give me a shot of Benadryl. That knocked me loopy.

I didn't wake up until we reached Jersey and the shore. Murphy pulled into a motel and shook me awake. "Jade, wake up. I'm tired, can't drive anymore. We need to get a room and sleep."

"I can drive."

"Yeah, let a 15 year old loose behind the wheel on the most deadly road in the nation. I don't think so."

"You got cash? They can track your credit card," I said and he rolled his eyes.

"I've seen CSI, too, Jade. The Sarge gave me cash. From the ER fund."

The ER fund was a legendary stash set aside in case a cop needed a million dollar lawyer or escape. The legend was that it was a million, it was actually closer to two, stocked by contributions from drug busts, illegal gambling and pay offs.

"You get rid of your cell phone, too?"

He nodded. "I can't take you any further. I have to go home or my wife will make waves. I was only on for two days."

"Who will take me next?"

"I called a buddy of mine from the 227 out of Atlantic City. He owes me a favor. He'll take you as far as DC."

"And the Pentagon?"

"I don't know, Jade. I have no idea how you will get to your dad. You got any other secret talents I don't know about?"

"No, Murphy. I wish I did. I wish I could just blink my eyes and be standing next to my Dad so I could whisk him away." Of course, that didn't happen.

He got us a room in the back near the beach where I could look out the window and see the breakers come in. The Taj Mahal was to the right, glittering like an exotic candle against the night sky. Fireworks went off behind it, celebrating another big winner.

I got the shower first and stood under it until my skin wrinkled, came out in clean underwear and jeans. Murphy padded in naked and actually sang in the shower. Old rock songs. He'd ordered room service and the knock came while he was still in there.

I let the dude in; paid him with the fifty he'd left on the counter and poked through the dishes.

He'd ordered a Philly cheese steak, pot roast with carrots, mashed potatoes, French fries and a basket of rolls with butter. I ate my way through it and when he finally came out, he stared at the remains of the meal. "Hungry?"

"Well, yeah. What did you order?"

He grunted, picked up the phone and ordered two specials. "I forgot how much teenage boys eat," he muttered.

I opened the door to the knock and flew backwards onto my ass when the waiter pushed the cart inside. Murphy came over to pick me up and froze as two men shoved us both back with silenced pistols.

They were short men, squat built like apes with over-muscled shoulders and biceps, dressed in dark suits. Their features were smooth, clean cut with dark hair and brown eyes with a blue flare deep in the backs. They moved like professionals, gestured for Murphy to back up and the other rammed me beyond the door with his feet. He slammed it shut behind us, pulled out

manacles and fastened them around Murphy's wrists. He raised the pistol to the level of his head and I screamed, kicked up and in my hand was the coin. I squeezed the gem and a beam pulsed out, curled around in an impossible arc and struck the two men.

They melted. Left puddles of greasy soot on the carpet and a smell not unlike ozone.

"Holy shit," Murphy said and I vomited up my dinner. That smell was almost worse than theirs was. "Jade, look in my belt. Find my handcuff key. Maybe it'll work on these. Time to get sick later. They won't have been alone, others will be with them."

I wiped my mouth and dug through his clothes, found his set of cuffs and the keys. It worked on the manacles around his wrists. He didn't waste any time but pulled on his clothes. Five minutes later, we were sneaking for the car.

He checked the hood, underneath and back seat before he let me get in or start it. Once on the road, I asked him what he'd been looking for.

"Bombs. Bugs. They had time to do both. Somehow, they tracked us." He was grim.

"They who? Who were those dudes?"

"I don't know, Jade. They didn't identify themselves and you destroyed all the evidence. I would have liked to search them."

"He was going to shoot you in the head, Murphy. Next time, I'll let you go first."

"I know. Thanks. For saving my life. How's your stomach?"

I swallowed bile, wiped my mouth. "I think it'll stay down where it belongs."

He floored the car and we merged into traffic. The lights on the highway were glowing beacons that made a distracting necklace before my eyes; I was glad I wasn't driving.

"Where are we headed? Will your friend find us? Did you call him?"

"I made arrangements to meet somewhere else if something happened. He's undercover, he knows how to keep a low profile, hide."

I sensed a new undercurrent in him and in his grim profile, deciphered it to ask with sudden enlightenment, "Murphy, are you scared of me?"

"Of what you can do, Jade," he returned, sliding the car around a corner onto an exit ramp. I saw lights behind us but so many it was hard to spot any one particular vehicle. It was a busy highway on a weekend night in the gambling capitol of the East Coast.

"You saved my life, Jade. It's how you did it that scares me. What was that?"

I shrugged. "How the hell do I know?"

"Can you still feel your dad's string?"

"Yes. He's in one spot. In a building underground."

"In DC? The Pentagon?" He accelerated onto another interchange and set the cruise at 70 mph.

"Murph, you need to go home. Before they know you're gone. To your wife and kids."

"I will. Once I get you safe, Jade. I owe AJ that. Besides, we were partners. I have to help him." He was silent the rest of the drive.

## Chapter 6

We stopped just across the border for breakfast at a McDonald's in a neighborhood that wasn't the best. Over a few blocks, I could see tall grim apartments and Murphy told me they were Projects built in the 60's so lower income could have places of their own. Now, they were filled with drug dealers and gang members and people too poor or afraid to leave.

I sat in the dining area, held my cup of hot cocoa between two palms, and did something I rarely liked to try. I searched for Murphy's string and gently tugged it, untangled it from the billions of others out there and ran it between my teeth. Something about its flavor told me

things, made pictures came into my head and let me see where it stretched. Its flavor was dark and bloody, the images sadistic. I spit it out to find Murphy smacking me on the back and alarmed people standing around us.

“Jesus, Jade,” he snarled. “You turned red, white and blue! You were choking to death! Are you okay?” He held my cup in one hand; the other was holding the back of my jacket. I wheezed and took a deep breath, gagged at cloying chocolate in my mouth and spat.

“Swallowed wrong,” I managed and the crowd sat back down staring at me. I looked for the rest rooms.

“What happened?” Murphy asked. “Too hot?”

“Need to go to the bathroom.” I stood up, wobbled and he held me steady until I managed a credible walk. I went into the family restroom where I could lock the door and be the only one inside. I stared into the mirror and saw my face, white, green eyes huge with unshed tears, and my mouth trembling. I wiped at the wetness, took several deep breaths and put the images of Murphy’s tortured broken body in the corner of my brain where I locked up all the bad memories or I would pick at them constantly like a scabbed sore.

I opened the door slowly, saw him at the table nursing his second cup and waited until Murphy’s attention was diverted by the manager. She bent over him in an animated conversation and I was able to slip out the rear door into the streets. Five minutes saw me deep into a neighborhood of concrete buildings; businesses boarded up and abandoned houses. I kept to the dark side of the sidewalks out of sight with my hand on Dad’s strings.

Walking for hours put me on service roads towards DC. I had no need of a map, merely followed the insistent tug in my hand. It became automatic to put one foot in front of the other. I used my knowledge of the strings to pick out places and people who would help me. Hitch hiking is safe when you know the lifeline of the person in your hands.

I reached DC at early morn, just as twilight faded. The sunrise over the Capitol building was impressive and bathed the dome in gold as the sun burned through the clouds. I could feel the humidity building, it was going to be a lot warmer here than in Boston.

Tourists were already gathering in crowds at the gates, the Washington monument stretched out green and peaceful with only a few bodies parked on the close cut velvet lawns.

I stared at Lincoln’s calm face and wished I could have read his string while he was alive. I could almost find and track the lost trace of it; I found some residue of him still out there in his lines of descendants.

I stood across the street from the J. Edgar Hoover Federal Building and gripped my Dad’s string tightly. He was inside and almost close enough to touch. If I could get inside.

I watched as agents arrived and entered the building using cards and a key punch. There was an entrance for visitors and I saw only a few people go that way through a set of metal detectors and a human guard who checked IDs and issued visitor passes.

Then, a tour bus with a group of high school kids pulled up and unloaded. I slipped into the back of their group, bumping a couple who gave me a curious glance but didn’t say anything.

The teachers were both women, one was a blonde with blue eyes in a neat pantsuit and looked like an agent, the other was an older woman who grumbled and carped at the kids constantly. Her hair was an improbable red and she wore fake lashes that looked like bugs crawling over her face. She held a clipboard with wrinkled papers and a cup of McDonald’s coffee.

“Alright, class,” she hollered. “One at a time through the metal detector.”

Of course, they set off the alarms with watches, belt buckles, backpacks, lunch boxes, pocketknives, flashlights and keys until they simply waved us all through.

“How many are you?” the guard asked handing out passes.

“Fifty-three,” she said looking at her list. He handed over the badges and she passed them out. I stood in line with my palm up and she gave me one without even looking at my face.

We marched en mass through the building escorted by Special Agents from their Public Information Department. They showed us the forensic labs, the VICAP in Behavioral Sciences Department amid jokes about Hannibal Lector and Clarisse Starling, the X-Files and Fox Mulder. The agents answered all the questions genially and teased back about the shows. I stayed with the group until we were taken to the cafeteria and treated to lunch.

I slipped out and took the fire stairs up to the fifth floor and rows of offices. The corridors were narrow; white walls with doors every few feet. I knew it was an inner hallway and none of these rooms would have windows.

I opened the ninth door on the left, no different looking than any of the others save that my dad’s string ended in there. I stuck my foot into the jamb and shoved the wad of napkin I’d kept from the lunchroom into the bolthole so it could not lock behind me.

AJ looked up from the table and his jaw dropped. He was alone but handcuffed to a bar on the wall. He wore a jumpsuit in orange and slim sneakers. He had a black eye.

I pulled out the cuff key I’d kept from Murphy and unlocked him, told him to strip and handed him the backpack with spare clothes.

“These are Murphy’s,” he said pulling on the chinos.

“Hurry, Dad. We have 21/2 minutes before this falls apart.”

“Where’s Murph? The guys with you?”

“Murph’s in Abbotsville, looking for me. I ditched him at the MickeyD’s.” I held the door open, stuffed the orange jumpsuit in the pack and walked out first. I gave him the visitor pass I’d swiped from another student.

We headed for the end of the corridor, turned left and I found the elevators. I ignored the cameras that I knew were tracking us, I could do nothing about them, just hoped that the watchers had gone out for a pee break or turned their head away to sneeze.

The elevator dinged open on the lobby and we walked quickly across the Great Seal, handed over our passes and were out the doors before the guard’s yells reached us. Somebody had finally noticed our passes had said Otter Valley High School Students and were both female names. I’d gambled that no one really looked at badge photos and been right. Dad grabbed me and ran across the street for the nearest underground station.

## Chapter 7

We rode the subway through the Capitol, didn’t get out until we had ridden it the entire loop. “Dad, they said you were dead. You and mom. Shot in the head. Said I did it. What happened? Who took you? “

“Franny’s dead?”

“Oh God, Dad!” I cried. “I thought you knew!”

“Tell me,” he said quietly, his voice tightly controlled but full of rage.

“Murphy said an anonymous tip came about a domestic disturbance and shots fired. Detectives found you and Mom dead, shot in the head; me missing, my books loaded with drugs and money. Your Sig Sauer missing.”

“Anyone who knows you knows you’ve never touched one of my guns. Not since I took you to the range that time. You never did tell me why you gave it up, you were damn good.”

“The strings tangled,” I muttered.

“The what?”

“Don’t ask, Dad. Just saw that if I kept practicing, something bad was going to happen.”

“I called you from the corner, saw some strange guys cruising near the house, and got a bad feeling. I called Murph, told him to pick you up at Some Place. When I drove back to the house, there were blacked out SUVs all over the place. BOLOS out for you. I was rear ended by some big beefy dude in sunglasses and whacked my head on the steering wheel. Was knocked out. Came to in some dingy cell in a government basement.”

“That was the Pentagon.”

“The---,” he stopped. “They kept asking me where you were. I was hooded and carted away. Don’t remember anything else until I woke up handcuffed to that bar in the interrogation room.”

“Are those dudes FBI, Dad?” I asked and he shook his head.

“They might be in the same building but they’re something more powerful and clandestine. I think NSA or DIA. Or worse, BlackOps.”

“What are we gonna do, Dad?”

“Get you someplace safe, first thing.”

“Yeah? Where’s that? The moon?” I retorted.

“You got a cell phone on you?”

“No. You know they can track you by cell phone towers?”

“Yes, Jade. I know that. We have to call somebody. We need a ride out of here.”

“Uh, Dad,” I said hesitantly. “I can hot wire a car.”

“Yeah? Where did you learn that little trick?”

“From Reilly.”

“Great. My Sergeant is teaching my son to be a criminal. So what did you have in mind?”

“First, we have to get off this train. Pick a station where there are many parked vehicles and no closed circuit TVs. Some of the older overhead garages are ideal places.”

“I can see I’m going to have to inspect your next year curriculum,” he said sourly. “Next stop is East DC. I don’t recommend that area because it’s a bad neighborhood. Lots of drive-by shootings and drug traffic.”

“What, you want Annapolis? By now, they must know you’re gone and the cops, the FBI will be scrambling to find you.”

“How did you get in the Hoover building, anyway?” He stood up and walked to the doors, hanging on to the strap as the train rocketed along.

We weren’t the only ones on; the seats were relatively empty but started filling up the closer into downtown we rode. “This next stop coming up is good.”

“How do you know?” he was curious.

“I can see our strings. Both of them continue on without tangles or tension,” I explained. I held onto him as the train lurched to a stop and the pneumatic doors opened.

“Jade, you are one weird boy,” he shook his head and stepped out onto the platform. We mingled with a few people, mostly professional types dressed in suits and nice clothes. No hipsters, gang bangers or t-shirt wearers. We caught a few stares but were clean enough that no one seemed overly curious.

The climb up onto the main street was an exercise in patience. I wanted to race up them yet my feet plodded like an old man’s. Dad took two steps to my one and waited for me with a frown. “You okay, Jeddy?”



I reached the top step and nodded. “Yeah. Tired. Really tired,” I paused. “Dad, I killed a couple of dudes yesterday. With the coin.”

His lips thinned. “I’m not surprised. Don’t let it bother you. I suspect they’ll do worse if they catch us. Come on. We need to get a vehicle and get out of here.

## Chapter 8

I found us a non-descript Taurus parked in the street beneath the overhead parking garage. It happened to have the window cracked enough for me to stick my hand inside and pop the lock. It took me about 15 seconds to hot wire it and shut off the alarm. Dad told me to push over and he took the wheel. We were halfway down the street when I popped the glove box and rummaged through the papers inside.

“Uh oh,” I swallowed and he glanced over at me before he searched for the Interstate signs.

“Uh oh what?”

“We just stole a senior FBI agent’s car. His personal car.”

“Great. It’ll be reported stolen as soon as he goes home.”

“Well, they do work 9-5 unlike you guys. That means it probably has a lojack on it. We’ll have to ditch it as soon as we can.”

“Any ideas?”

These streets were narrow and full of potholes, he kept turning left and I could see the Federal building complex to our right with huge parking lots of vehicle after vehicle.

“We could always steal one of those,” I pointed.

“Yeah, sure. With our luck, we’d take the VP’s.”

“Is he here?” I perked up. “I always wanted to meet the President or the VP. Be a great term paper. How I was a teenage felon and wanted by the FBI.”

He smacked me on the back of the head. “Jade, you’re an ass. Look for the I80 signs. We need to get out of the city.”

“Tell me where you want to go and I’ll do my thing.”

“Your mom’s aunt had a cabin down in Tennessee, in the Cumberland Gap. We can hide there,” he decided. “No one’s been there in twenty years.”

“Is it still standing?” I was skeptical.

“It was two years ago when the guys went hunting on it, still usable then.”

I heard the blare of horns and something hit us from the rear. My neck snapped and I flew forward into the passenger door as a big black SUV rammed us again.

Dad tried to steer out of it but he wasn’t wearing his seat belt and the force knocked him into me, squashing me against the door. I felt my ribs protest, felt a crushing, snapping sensation and all the air rushed out of me. Black spots filled my vision, my head smacked into the glass and abruptly, we were rolling around and around inside the car.

I heard finally, the drip, drip, drip of some kind of liquid and it was hitting me in the forehead and sliding down my eyes and nose. I found it difficult to breathe. I tried to move and nothing worked except for my right hand. I pushed against something soft and mushy, felt warm sticky stuff, and smelled that unique coppery odor that told me I was in blood and tasting it in my mouth. I swallowed and more came, making me gag and that scared me.

“Dad?” I wheezed. Everything took on an unreal quality as if I was experiencing everything through a sheet of plastic and slowed down to 33 rpm when it should have been 78. Faces shoved their way into the windows. I thought they were upside down until I realized I was upside down.

“Unit 1, we have the package. Need medical on the way. Victims were not restrained. Looks like one fatality and one head trauma, possible chest. Main package is cyanotic, whistling, laceration on the scalp, blood in the mouth. Pulse is 125, respiration 11 and labored.”

“Unit 11 responding with paramedics. Do you need a life flight unit?” Someone’s hand pulled up my eyelids. “Yes.” That was the last thing I heard until I felt the low, heavy thump of rotor blades and that stomach dropping sensation as a plane took off.

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My hands were shaking. Shaking so hard I couldn’t use them. I opened my eyes; still saw through slits. My whole face felt swollen, hot, and hurt. It hurt to breathe and something was in my throat breathing for me. It hissed and thumped, pulled my chest up and down. I tried to claw at it, pull it out but my hands wouldn’t move.

I kicked my feet and only the toes moved, slowly curling back and forth. I tried rolling and couldn’t do that. By now, my heart was racing as terror took hold of me and somewhere, an alarm began beeping. People rushed into the room and poked at me, talked to me but it sounded like gibberish. I stopped fighting, it was too hard and easier to let the waves of blackness pull me down into a place where I didn’t have to face the epic loss I knew was waiting for me.

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“We’re going to take out the breathing tube today, he’s fighting it too much and his lungs have stayed inflated, his pulse ox is normal. Both pneumothorax have been reduced, the broken ribs are stable. I’m more worried about the skull fracture and the C-4 break. I haven’t seen much movement in his lower extremities.”

“How bad is his skull fracture?”

“Hairline but he has subdural hematomas that bled for three days. We put a drain in; he’s been unconscious for five days. Ah, his eyes are flickering. Jade, can you open your eyes? Squeeze my hand.”

I felt fingers slip into mine, warm, long and with hair on the knuckles, not calloused or hard like my Dad’s.

“Poppy?” I asked my lips fat and swollen. The inside of my cheeks were sore as if I’d bitten them. I was thirsty and my throat hurt. I swallowed. “Want a drink.”

“Well, hello, Jade. Ice chips. Look at me, Jade.” I stared. My eyes were blurry but I could make out a man’s face, gray hair, and brown eyes, wrinkled in a white coat over scrubs. He was with another man in a uniform. He wore Colonel’s pips on the shoulder.

“What happened?”

“You were in a car accident. It rolled. You went through the windshield. Broke your ribs, collapsed both lungs, and fractured your skull and your neck.”

“Ahh.” I took it all in. “Where am I?”

“Maryland. Crowley trauma. I’m Dr. Alastair.”

“How did I get here? I live in Uxbridge, Mass.”

“You drove down with your dad.”

“Dad? Where is he? Is he okay?” I tried to sit up as alarm filled me.

“Jade, he didn’t make it. The car crushed him when it flipped. You weren’t wearing seat belts,” the other man said.

“Who are you?”

“Colonel Mateo Brightarm. NSA.”

“Where am I? What happened?” I asked and the doctor answered patiently.

“Crowley Trauma. You were in a car accident. You’re in the ICU.”

“Oh.” I paused, confused. “Where’s my Dad?”

“He’s not here, Jade. We’ll be in every 15 minutes to check on you, okay? We don’t want you to go to sleep.”

“Why? What happened?”

“Head injuries,” he said. “He can’t remember anything for longer than a few minutes. We’ll keep him awake for 24 hours, do an MRI and CAT scan, see if the bleed has reduced or gotten worse, and go on from there.”

“My head hurts,” I said. “Everything hurts. Why are my eyes all blurry?”

“You hit your head, Jade. You have two black eyes, broken eye orbit, cheek and nose. The swelling will go down in a few more days. The nurse will give you some ice for it if you want.”

“I’m thirsty. I feel pukey, too.” I threw up all over the sheets and it made me feel worse. The nurses came in, cleaned me up and held me while I puked up a thin bile that burned my sinuses and my throat. The doctor ordered something and they put it in my IV; in minutes, I was floating, my stomach forgotten.

“Don’t fall asleep, Jade.” Voices annoyed me all night, wouldn’t let me sleep.

## Chapter 9

I kept asking them questions, I didn’t understand where I was or how I got there. I didn’t ask why when they hauled me upstairs to the department called neurology and stuck me in that tube for hours. The banging and clicking hurt my head, made the strings all tangled and jangled until it drove me crazy. I remember screaming uncontrollably and smacking at the sides of the tube and they brought men in who stuck me with a shot that melted me.

It wore off hours later and I was back in bed. In a room I knew was a hospital. I was tied to the rails with soft restraints at my wrists and an uncomfortable collar was on my neck so that I couldn’t turn it.

“Hey!” I yelled and was surprised that my voice was thin and raspy. I cleared my throat; it was dry as if I’d had a sore throat. I wanted a big glass of water. I looked around the room, spotted a pink pitcher with a straw in it on one of those bed tray tables. It was just out of my reach and tormented me.

I saw no cards, no flowers, nothing to indicate anyone knew I was here. “Mom? Dad?” My voice wavered as the pain in my head cranked up a notch.

“Ah, you’re awake, Jade,” said a man’s voice. I saw a doctor in white lab coat over street clothes. His name was embroidered over the pocket. Dr. Hambly.

“Where am I?”

He flicked a penlight in my eyes and away. “Good. Reaction is equal and responsive. How’s your head?”

“Hurts. Worst headache I’ve ever had,” I answered, pulling at my wrists.

“We’ll take those off in a minute, Jade. You’re in Crowley Trauma, ICU. Maryland.”

I stopped moving. “Maryland! What the hell am I doing in Maryland?”

“What do you remember, Jade?”

I frowned, struggled, and saw images of me at the library. With flashes of Murphy driving and I was filled with an overwhelming sadness laden with crushing terror. “Where’s my Dad?” I wailed.

“They took him to another facility,” he answered carefully. “You were in a car accident. In DC. He was driving.”

“Why? Why were we in DC?”

“I don’t know, Jade.”

“Is my Dad okay?”

He hesitated and that was answer enough. I swallowed, tried to turn my head away but I wasn’t even allowed the luxury of hiding my tears. The cervical collar prevented that.

“I’m sorry, Jade. Do you have any other relatives?”

“My mom?”

“She was murdered the day before your accident.”

“No. I was adopted,” I said dully.

“Oh.”

“What happened to me?”

“You crushed your ribs, collapsed both your lungs, and fractured your neck and your skull.”

“Broke my neck?” I stared at him in horror and then paused in thought. “But, my hands move. I can feel my feet.”

“You didn’t cut your spinal cord. Just bruised it, the swelling puts pressure on it and makes the nerves unresponsive. Movement should come back once the swelling goes down.”

“Should come back? You mean I’m paralyzed?” My voice shook. I tried moving my legs. Too many shocks at once.

“You have some movement, Jade. We’re confident it will come back. Do you want something for your headache?”

“Leave me alone.”

“I can’t do that, Jade. You’re under 24-hour observation. There’s a guard outside the door. As soon as you’re stable, you’ll be transferred to a government facility.”

So, they knew about me. “Who are you? I know who you are, I mean what are you? NSA? DIA?”

“I’m a doctor at Crowley Trauma, ER surgeon. Colonel Brightarm will explain everything to you. You don’t remember him but he’s been in here several times to sit with you.”

“Why? How long?”

“Six days. You woke up yesterday but we had to knock you out again. You had a ...panic attack in the CAT scan. Are you claustrophobic?”

“No. Let me loose, please. I’d like a drink.”

He undid the restraints on my hands and I pulled them across my chest and rubbed them. He cranked the bed up so I could sit; I saw out the door into the rest of the ICU and caught the corner of the chair where a uniformed soldier sat. I’d assumed my guard was a cop not military.

I was able to reach forward and pick up the pitcher, drained it dry of ice water. He set it down for me and waited. I realized he was waiting to see if it stayed down but my vomiting was over.

“You’ll have headaches for a while. Incipient nausea on and off, too. You have a pretty severe concussion with a bleed. Retrograde amnesia. You probably won’t remember the accident or the days before it. That’s not uncommon in head injuries.”

A man in uniform came in without knocking. He was dark haired, his skin a rich coppery color, his uniform that of a Colonel in the AF. He was clean-shaven and very crisp, talked with an accent not of the South but the East Coast.

“He’s awake,” he stated. Very observant, too.

“Who are you?”

“We’ve met. You don’t remember?”

"No." I stared at him; he managed not to be intimidated but gave me a brilliant white smile. His teeth were perfect and I suspect, entirely natural.

"I'm Colonel Mateo Brightarm."

"Seneca?" I asked and he looked startled.

"Onondaga. Most people guess Cherokee or Sioux."

"The accent. East Coast."

"How are you feeling?"

"Like shit." He moved to the side of my bed and picked up my wrist. His fingers stroked the welts I'd made trying to pull free.

"Where were you born, Jade?"

The doctor cleared his throat. "I'll remind you he's still in ICU, still medically fragile, Colonel."

"I won't hurt a hair on his head, doctor. Interesting colors, that. You ever see a 15-year-old with gray hair? Other than progeria victims? Answer the question, Jade." His eyes were bright, sparkling like chips of amber.

"I don't know. I was adopted."

"Your parents didn't go through any legal agencies. Did they purchase you on the black market?"

"There's a black market for kids?" I returned.

"Of course. Babies for adoption, babies for sex offenders, special orders for sexual predators with unlimited funds, sex traders even for organs. Isn't the Internet wonderful? Even you know that, you have your own website tracking down oddities... Like you."

"There aren't any like me." I was quiet. So far, I hadn't tracked anyone else with weird abilities like mine. Although there was a vague rumor out there of a teenage kid who could walk into shadows and disappear. They said his eyes were strange, too. One blue eye and one green. Personally, I thought that was cool.

"No, Jade, there aren't."

"What are you going to do with me?" I clenched my fists, my hands were sweaty and my heart raced.

"Just worry about getting better, Jade. As soon as the doctors release you, we'll transfer you to a safe house where you can recover completely."

"You mean I'll be a prisoner," I retorted.

"On the contrary, Jade, you'll be free to go anywhere you wish. However, you have no family; legally you have no claim on your parents' estate and will go into the foster care program."

"No, dad's SWAT team won't let that happen," I returned.

"They think you died in that car crash. Your friend Murph identified your dad's body and yours."

"Murphy was there?"

"You ditched him at the McDonald's. We were trailing you; let you lead us to your father."

"You killed him." I stared at him.

"Who would've thought a cop would drive without seat belts? Of all the people in the world, he should've known better. We're just lucky he didn't kill you, too."

"Go away. Leave me alone."

"I'm sorry, Jade. Alone is something you'll never be again. I hope you feel better soon. Get some rest. I won't warn you about trying to escape. Dr. Alastair assured me, you won't be walking for a while. Not until your spinal cord heals. If you should try before it does, the damage might be permanent." He smiled and left me with that thought.

Nurses came and went, they took blood, gave me treatments for my lungs, stuck me, plied me with pills, bullied me into eating and when I complained about not having to go to the bathroom, presented me with a bedpan and told me I was catheterized.

"Oh. That's what I feel down there?"

"Yes. Once you get up, will take it out. You can use a urinal, or go to the restroom."

"He said I'm not supposed to walk."

"Oh, we'll be getting you up with PT. That's scheduled for tomorrow. We'll have you take a few steps between handrails and in a harness. You'll have to wear the collar for a few weeks."

"It hurts my chin," I complained. "I can't turn my head."

"That's the point. Now, finish your supper so I can give you a bed bath."

"Don't want one." I was too embarrassed for her to see me naked.

"You're getting pretty ripe," she said. I shrugged.

"Worse things in life than dirt," I returned. I slid down in bed and pulled the sheets up to my chin, staring at her until she picked up my tray and left.

## *Chapter 10*

Whenever I decided I didn't want to do something, I woke up to find it already done. They must be drugging me in my sleep and bypassing my wishes. It made me angry and I kept that hot core of anger buried in my gut, took it out when I was alone and stoked it.

Once they left me alone just inside the x-ray room, tied to a gurney while the tech went to get another film plate. She left me by the telephone and within easy reach. I managed to dial an outside line and Murph's cell number but I couldn't get through before she came back and saw the phone off the hook. She hung it up, stared at me and pushed it out of my reach.

"Who are you trying to call, Jade?"

I shrugged. "I was ordering pizza."

"You know, I'll have to report this."

"Why? You're not part of the NSA, are you? You're hospital staff."

"Jade, this isn't a hospital. It's a secure facility on an Air Force Base called Dreamland."

"I'm not in Maryland?"

"No. You were for seven hours until we had you stabilized, and then you were brought here."

"Why'd they lie to me?" I asked miserably. I thought if I could get out of the hospital, I could make it back to Boston and the team.

"It'd take a miracle to escape, Jade. You're underground in a reworked missile complex in the middle of a square 400 miles of nothing. The only way in or out is helicopter, jet or SUVs with four-wheel-drive and long-range gas tanks. Or camels."

"What state?"

"Nevada. Now, just relax. I'm going to take a few pictures of your neck and ribs."

"Do I have a choice?" I said sourly. "What do they think I am? Some kind of Superman?"

"On the contrary, Jadewyn James," said the voice that belong to the Indian colonel. "We don't know what you are at all." He came into the lab and watched as she manipulated me on the cold steel table and took several views of my neck and rib cage. She warned him to stay out or where the lead apron, made sure she covered my crotch with it.

"Stay, there, I want to make sure these are good before I return you. Keep an eye on him, Sir. He's sneaky."

"Smart and sneaky. The switchboard picked up your phone call, Jade. No outgoing calls are put through without clearance. Your dad's former team can't help you."

"What do I you want with me, anyway? All I can do is find things, nothing that special. And I'm not able to walk through walls or bend light or step from one place to another. I can't speak any languages or see things happen before they do."

"I know you're not psychic or gifted that way, Jadewyn. We're not interested in your little...trick of finding things, although it is a curious talent. No, what interests me more is where you came from."

"What do you mean?" I was puzzled. He stuck his face in mine and stared at my eyes and hair.

"Haven't you looked in a mirror, Jade? You ever see another being with these eyes, your gray hair? I've heard the report of how your mother was found nearly dead and disappeared in an...unearthly manner."

"How? I looked for a report and there wasn't one," I protested.

"There was. Filed under top-secret and buried. One of the clerks sold it on eBay for big bucks. A reporter found it and did a story, we tracked it down. Found your dad. And then you."

"What, you think I'm some kind of extraterrestrial, an alien hybrid? You've had me for weeks! You've seen me bleed, done all kinds of tests on me! I'm human!"

"No," he shook his head slowly, grimly. "You're not. Your DNA is nothing remotely human. You look normal, mostly on the outside. Your organs are all standard and in the right places, your blood is even red and mixes with plasma, but that's as far as it goes. You have 112 chromosomes, not 48, your blood is neither A, B, or O but all three in every combination known. You have no Rh factor. The most obvious difference is in your hair and your eyes. Do you know you can see in the dark?"

"I've always had good night vision."

"It's more than that, Jade. You survived a fatal car crash, unrestrained; you're recovering faster than a human teenager would."

"What are you going to do to me?" My voice trembled because now I was afraid.

"Cooperate and I can convince them you're more valuable alive and in one piece," he said soberly.

"They'd cut me up?" I was horrified.

"Not necessarily wait until you were dead, either."

"Holy Christ." I was silent digesting that, wondered if I'd have been better off dying with my dad. "What do you want me to do?" I was resigned.

"Whatever I tell you. Whatever the scientists want. I would suggest you make yourself invaluable, so they decide to keep you alive. First, tell me what you remember about your mother."

"Not much. I was two years old, traumatized sitting in her blood next to her dead body."

"Who killed her?"

"Not who, what," I replied, and he jumped at that.

"What? Why what? The report stated no one was there. Just you and the body. Did you see who killed her?"

"Big black things," I was lost in two-year-olds tortured memories. I could remember the hulking dark, menacing shadows that tossed my mother about like spindrift, but not the actual shooting that killed her. Those memories were so bleak I did not want to recall them.

"They looked like gorillas. Arms longer than they should be, powerful. Not quite human."

"They're called Druz," he spoke softly and I looked up, startled. "Druz. My people have legends of them, the Dark Ones. They are sent to kill the Golden Ones. But those are just legends. No one has ever seen one."

"I have. Two of them tried to kidnap me and Murphy in Atlantic City."

"The two agents?"

"They weren't agents," I denied.

"None of mine are missing, nor any FBI agents. So, you might be right. Your own kind are after you, too?"

"I don't know who my kind are," I retorted. "You going to keep me safe from them, too?"

He sneered, "First they have to find you. If they exist." He walked out on that note and left me with the x-ray tech.

## *Chapter 11*

Physical therapy translated as torture. The PT was a dude with ropy muscles, glasses and a goatee. He shaved his head and made me do all sorts of exercises to build up my back muscles and to keep my neck from overworking. My ribs protested, my legs were weak but in the end, I got through each session a little stronger than I'd come in. I could walk the length of the side rails and even managed to breathe at the same time. The rubber band exercises were silly, and I told him so; he made me do weights instead. I liked the bike machine and hated the steps. Climbing made pains shoot up into my neck and gave me a headache.

They took off the collar in week three and I could turn my head slowly, and stiffly. If I tried to move it too fast, it locked up and electric shock went through me. I saw so many doctors, techs, and scientists I cringed in my sleep when I heard my door open.

They had moved me off the main floor to one used to house experimental animals, and I was grateful they hadn't stuck me in one of the 8 x 10 cages. It was bad enough I had a 12 x 12 room, locked and barred with only a bathroom door to me in privacy.

My stomach was in a constant state of turmoil, I was developing an ulcer from the stress. I still hadn't a clue where I was or how I was getting out, didn't know what had happened to my dad's body or the coin. I knew he was gone, I'd felt his strings snap and retreat with a finality that had penetrated even into my coma. I just couldn't face it. I'd lost two sets of parents. I suspected Murphy wasn't looking for me and no one else knew I even existed. It was no wonder I wallowed in self-pity and despair. The staff tiptoed around me. I could have yelled 'BOO!' and they would all have fled in terror. I guess they were waiting for me to grow a third head or turn green.

Time drifted. I was anchor-less. I'd ask for things to occupy my mind; all they would give me were books, fiction. I devoured everything. I had no contact with the outside, no TV, no Internet, no cell phone. My mind would have stagnated, except for losing myself in the rich fantasy worlds of Hicks, Koontz and King. Didn't give me any escape ideas, though.

I was dozing on my bed with the newest Odd Thomas on my chest when the pneumatic door slid open and the Colonel strode in. He threw a handful of clothes at me, told me to get dressed in a hurry.

I stared at him in confusion. I had no need of clothes, hospital gowns made it easier for their doctors and science quacks to stick me.



"Get dressed. Now," he ordered and I flipped the sheets off, picked up the pile and went through it. Boxers, T-shirt in drab green, cargo pants in desert camouflage and the short-sleeved shirt to match. No name on the pockets. There were tube socks and a pair of summer weight boots with both laces and zippers. A thin belt for the pants.

I pulled the underwear on, under the gown and then the pants before I pulled off the johnny. He stared at my chest, which was still mottled yellowish green from the breaks, black, and blues from surgery. I still had a red scar where both drain tubes had been stitched in.

"You've got a good chest on you," he grunted. "Decent shoulders, biceps. How old are you?"

"15."

"You play any sports?"

"With my dad's SWAT team. Paintball. Motor-cross. Swimming."

"Not basketball, football?"

"Hockey. Ice."

"You any good?"

I stopped tucking my shirt into my waistband. "You trying to make friends or just conversation, Colonel? Or put me at ease before you lower the boom?"

"Put your shoes on. They're waiting."

I stomped my feet in the boots, pulled up the zippers and had to rest to catch my breath. By that time, several guards were waiting outside my door and escorted us down the hallway. They made me ride in a wheelchair and I nearly broke my neck whipping it back and forth memorizing everything I could see.

They brought me to an elevator marked Freight and pushed me in backwards. We rode up in silence, and I watched the indicator lights go up 15 floors before they hit ground level and opened into an absolutely humongous concrete warehouse big enough to park ten 747s. I know because I counted them. Also a couple of F17's. My eyeballs got big and my ears popped. The noise was bad, engines were idling and it was hot. I could feel the moisture sucked out of me and I found it hard to breathe.

We stood there for five minutes and then an armored Humvee pulled up and dispensed several officers of higher rank than the Colonel and two men dressed in suits. They stared at me as if I was a particularly nasty bug that needed stomping.

"Is this the subject?" The one with the nerdy glasses asked.

"Yes, Sen. Conley," the Colonel shouted. "Let's get loaded, so we don't have to shout."

One of the guards pulled out handcuffs and leg irons and I bolted out of the chair.

"What the hell!" I yelled. "I'm not a convict or a criminal! You're not putting those on me!"

They grabbed me, flipped me around and had me restrained before I could take another breath to scream. Throwing me in the backseat of the Humvee, they chained me to a bolt on the floor. I jerked and succeeded only in making my wrists and ankles sore.

"You fucking bastards! Cock-sucking, assholes! Mother Effing dirt bags!" I went through every curse I could think of, and when 'neavah pangorum gaeddon' came out, I stopped as a red tide filled my gut and rivulets of lightning sparked from my eyes and fingertips. "Holy shit!" I said and in my palm was my coin. I pressed the stone and the Humvee bounced in the air as if kicked by an angry mule, flipped twice and came to rest on its side. It'd tossed us all around like Scrabble tiles in the cup, but me least of all because I was shackled. All I could hear was the groaning of bodies and the stressed moans of metal.

I shook my head, jerked on the chains and saw them melt at the link binding me to the bolt. Scrambling over the seats and bodies, I aimed for the back tailgate and kicked with both feet to see the glass pop out. Sliding feet first, I felt glass shards cut my ribs, but I was too hyped on adrenaline to feel much pain. We hadn't gotten very far, were still inside the terminal and now, hundreds of soldiers and vehicles were headed my way. I looked frantically around for some direction to run to and decided back into the facility was my best bet.

I took three steps and something hit me in the back. My eyes rolled back in my head, and a massive electrical surge went through me. I couldn't move, couldn't breathe and then the switch cut off and I fell to the ground twitching. I saw the long curly cables from a Taser, and felt the metal prongs sticking into my back and then I felt nothing at all.

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"Is he conscious yet, Colonel?" The voice was harsh, dry with a soft southern accent.

My head hurt. Every muscle ached. A spot on my back burned. I tried to talk and something was crammed in my mouth. Struggling, a hand forced me back down until I was pressed into carpet on a flat surface. I could hear the humming of tires and smelled dust. Chains rattled.

"He's awake. Fighting," said the dry voice. Hands gripped my nose and sealed it off. I couldn't breathe through my mouth and now my nose. I tried to fight as the red flashes went through my vision and it dwindled to a tunnel.

"Stop, or I'll knock you out," he warned and let go. My nose flared like a wind broke nag as I sucked in as much air as I could. My eyes streamed tears. I lay quietly, my mouth tasting of rubber. It felt as if they had stuffed a rubber ball in there.

"How much further is it to the plane?"

"Another 90 miles to the crash site. We'll conduct the tests there."

"Is it safe? You made no mention of him having any... weapons."

"We found none on him, Senator. He exhibited no abnormal behavior or phenomenon before. This was as new to us as you," said the Colonel. "I suspect if he can't talk, he can't control it. It only appeared as he said those words."

"Can you control him?"

"Well, Tasers seem to take him down a peg or two. He's had 2 ml of Ativan also. Just enough to keep in this side of mellow. I don't believe we'll have any more problems with him." He pulled up my eyelids and the light hurt. I tried to blink, but all I could do was cry.

## **Chapter 12**

The desert stretched all around us, an endless vista of sand dunes, Cholla cactus and Saguaro. There were tents set up here and there; under them, was a makeshift camp of soldiers resting out of the heat and digging holes. I could see part of a downed aircraft, just a piece of the tail, but knew it was a jet and that it was in many pieces.

"Unload him under the tent," he ordered and I was carried out like a mail parcel and dumped on a cot near the entrance where the sun came in baking that corner. Sweat poured out of me in sheets and instantly dried. I tried wiggling and got a slap on the ass for it.

"Don't move."

Several grunts came over to eyeball me. "Report, Capt. Jeffers?" The Colonel demanded. "Peterson, make sure the Senator and Mr. Andrews are taken to the air-conditioned tent."

"Yes, sir," one of the guards saluted and led the two wilting suits away.

"No sign of the pilots' bodies or ordinance, Sir," the young grunt said eyes riveted on me.

"Six days and no one can find them? Two Stinger missiles, four Tomahawks and two men with parachutes. Oh well, time to pull out my little project." He cut something at the back of my head, and a rubber gag popped out of my mouth. "Don't say a word or the gag goes back in," he threatened.

I swallowed my mouth full of drool and the taste of rubber. "This is how this works. You find some things for me and I let you live without leg chains and cuffs. Curse again, or bring up that fireworks show, you'll get tasered and gagged. Understand?"

I nodded. "Understood. What is it you want me to find?"

"You know what a cruise missile is?" Now, everyone within earshot perked up and studied me. "Yeah."

"Find it. Find them, four of them."

"And the pilots?"

"Them, too."

"I need something of theirs."

"Like what? Clothing, photo?"

"Anything they've touched in the last few days." He pointed to the tail of the plane. I touched it, untangled the thousands of strings to pull out the ones he wanted and followed them out into the brutal sunshine, heading in the opposite direction than where everyone else was searching.

"There's 100 miles of nothing but sand that way. Are you sure? We would have spotted wreckage on the salt flats. How far out?"

"Too far to walk," I muttered. So they rounded up dune buggies and followed my directions. What looked like a flat sand was in reality, ravines and gullies hidden by dunes and mirages. I made them stop after an hour, got off the buggy and walked into a draw concealed by an outcropping of sandstone. There was the first pilot's body, bloated and covered with flies already nearly skeletonized. There wasn't much smell left; the heat had parched all the fluids out.

Two hours to the west, I found the other. It was sundown before I reach the last missile and I was exhausted, dehydrated and ready to collapse. No one had thought to give me any water and from the way they were eying me, I was lucky not to be strung up in stocks. They thought I was some kind of which. Even the smart mouthed Colonel was silent. He pulled me over to the nearest sand buggy and got on the radio, reported the GPS locations and handed me a bottle of water. I drank it gratefully in three swallows and looked for more. "Not too fast," he cautioned. "You'll vomit."

I sat down in the closest shade, closed my eyes and went away for a while.

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The hand that shook me awake wasn't the Colonel's or one of the bigwigs, but one of the grunts who'd been shoveling aimlessly near the tail section. He was only a few years older than me, pretty enough to be a Justin Bieber look-alike but more buffed and with a dark tan and wrinkles from the sun. His eyes were pale blue under the sunglasses he wore on his forehead. He held out a bottle of ice water. "What's your name, kid?" He asked and my lips twisted in amusement. I felt a hundred years older than he did.

"Jade. Jadewyn James. You?" I allowed him the luxury of introducing himself even though he wore his name on his breast pocket. He was an airman first class.

"Pete Janssen." He waited, as if I should know it.

"Hi."

"My sister –" he paused, rubbed his neck, which was his brown as a butternut. "My sister is Kassie Lyn Janssen. Older sister. She disappeared eight years ago. In Florida, from her art literature class. The police think she was kidnapped and murdered."

"I'm sorry." I took the water and drank it.

"Will you look for her? I'll pay you. Eight years I've been waiting for my sister to come home, my parents have beggared themselves both mentally and financially looking for her. I can't sleep at night for nightmares, she calls me, tells me she wants to come home. Sometimes, I see her walking down the street, at the Mall and when I touch them, it's only a stranger. Please, can you bring Kassie home?"

I heaved a sigh, picked up his hand, searched for the flavor of his sister's string, and found it, wafting gently in the air. Its end was torn and frayed, ghostly after eight years and broken in a particularly heinous way. I got the image of 55-gallon drums stored in a locker, one of those You Rent All places. The horrible thing was, there were 20 or more of them stacked neatly inside a Pod.

"St. Louis, Missouri. Unit 257, under the name Axelrod," I told him he sobbed out a thank you. "She's in the 12th drum," I added wearily.

"12! How many are there?"

"20 or more. He's been doing it for a long time."

"Who? Who did it?" Now he was flushed with anger, but I wouldn't walk down that string nor taste the flavor of it. I'd eaten enough shit these last few weeks.

"No more, please," I covered my eyes. "You won't get anyone to open the locker up without a warrant and they won't give you one without probable cause."

He laughed harshly. "I'll find a way to get in there, don't worry." He pressed my hands, got up and walked over to his captain who was deep in conversation with him.

The Colonel came over, and stood over me. He spoke finally, "you can return to your room, Jade. Sorry, but the handcuffs and ankle chains have to go back on."

"Where can I go? You think I can whistle up a dragon down here, fly me off? Or an invisible jet? Or teleport myself? I'm stuck here until you drag me out." I held out my wrists, he wrapped his fingers around them, and pulled me to my feet.

"Get in the back of the Humvee, and don't say a word," he ordered and I followed him, sat between two armed guards. We caravanned between the flatbed with the wreckage, and the loaded bodies. Others would return in the morrow for the lost ordinance.

### **Chapter 13**

As a treat for my good behavior, the Colonel let me eat in the mess hall; yet set apart from the other personnel. I had a table in a corner all to myself, other than the two burly guards who accompanied me everywhere. Because I had found their missing items, the head of the special agency was more interested in those talents than the fact that I wasn't quite human although their scientists were having a field day with my STATS.

Lunch wasn't bad. The food was good and plenty of it. I was homesick, missed the cool, crispness of the East Coast. I hated this dry reconstituted air and I was bored out of my mind. I spent a lot of time in that cell, staring at the walls and after lunch, they brought me back. I wasn't alone, two people in lab coats were there waiting on me with a basket filled with needles, syringes and tubes.

"Roll up your sleeve, please," one said, and I shivered. I was so sick of being poked and dissected.

"What now? Haven't you people figured out my blood yet?" And pulled the uniform sleep up. He tied the rubber around my bicep, popped the vein and drew four tubes in various colors, leaving the needle in and inserting a butterfly, he taped it down.

"What's this for?" I didn't need an IV in me.

"Please hold still," he said, and pulled out a prefilled syringe.

"What is that?"

He nodded to the guard who grabbed my head and neck while the other pushed me into the chair. I tried to heave myself up, but they were bigger than I was, and outweighed me by at least 40 pounds.

"This stuff hurts going in," he warned and pushed the plunger. It did. It burned like acid eating my veins and made me unable to move, unable to respond. "Put him on the bed, I need to hook him up to fluids and cath him. This will be a long trip and we need him unresponsive."

I felt like I was flying through the air. I tried to ask them where I was going but my tongue felt like a toilet plunger stuck in my throat. Everything took on an unreal quality. I knew we were leaving, and I saw tunnels through the underworld, demons straight out of Tolkien fantasies and they spoke a language I could not understand. Time had no meaning, I thought years had gone by then only a few months, came to understand it was only hours. Woke up inside a van set up like an ambulance with me in the back. The windows were blacked out and I was being watched over by people dressed as SWAT paramedics only they were armed with automatic weapons. The Colonel was there and he was the first to notice that my eyes were open and aware.

"Jade?"

"Yahelwehe," I mumbled. I tried again. "Where am I?"

"Boston."

"Boston! Why did you bring me back? Are you take me home?"

His laugh was derisive. "Not hardly. You're going to the Allardyne Blue Maxx Supercomputer facility outside of Harvard University, where the top science geeks of both MIT and Harvard are going to... how shall I say it, dissect your brain. Maybe your insides too."

I stared at him in horror. "You shit! You crazy fighting shit! Let me go! You can't do this to me!" I tried to kick, to get my hands loose, but nothing moved freely and they watched me struggle until blood ringed my wrists and defeat covered my face. I tried not to cry in despair, but it sat so heavy on me, I felt so lost and abandoned that I gave up. A part of me died, then. I turned my head into the wall and didn't hear another word they said to me.

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I felt it when the van entered the Big Dig. It dipped and kept going down; the air-cooled and the smell of saltwater filled the air. It grew darker inside and flashes of headlights threw random streaks into the back where I lay.

The two jabbered away ignoring me as if I was only a thing and when one of them lurched onto me, I was surprised. He didn't move and that's when I saw the bullet hole in his forehead and the hole in the back door. The van lurched and spun out of control, knocking the other dude into the side of the wheel well. I heard him grunt and cry out in pain over the screeching of tires. The Colonel hung on to the side straps, but even he was tossed about and landed next to me as the van came to a shuddering stop. The back doors flew open and brilliant headlights streamed in to reveal four of those hulking black shapes that I remembered too well. The creatures from my nightmares had found me.

Brightarm muttered Druz under his breath and reached for his gun, only to have it snatched from his hand and tossed contemptuously out the tunnel.

"Are you injured?" Its voice was like river gravel, I could see its eyes---large, expressive and light blue.

"No. Not really," I answered. "I was restrained, not thrown as badly as the others."

"Can you walk?"

"I'm belted and tied in. Are you going to hurt me?"

He advanced, drew out a wicked curved blade and sliced through the steel of the cuffs, hauled me up by my collar and set me on my feet in the tunnel. Headlights from a big SUV blinded me.

"Go on," he said and before I'd taken two steps, I heard the chunk of his blade slicing through something and the thud as it hit the floor. I was afraid to turn and look, afraid I might see heads bouncing. Two others escorted me into the middle seat, belted me in and flanked me. The big dude came back, wiped blood off his knife, gave me a feline grin and climbed into the driver's seat. He stepped on it, drove around the wreck and proceeded through the tunnel as if he was on his way to the Stop & Shop.

"Who are you? You're not going to kill me?"

"Kill you?" The driver laughed. "Why would we want to kill you? We rescued you."

"The other two I blasted wanted to. And they killed my mother," I said.

"Killed Lady Ethelyn? Oh, grievous day," he returned slowly. "Then, the Seillach coin is gone?"

"The what?" Now I was confused.

"Did your mother, the Lady Ethelyn give you anything before she passed?"

My hand closed around the golden coin, and I opened it slowly to stare. "You mean this?" I asked and he slammed on the brakes and pulled over in the chicken lane to stare at the glowing green eye of the gem.

"Neavah Seillach pangorum gaeddan," he whispered and the glow filled the interior lighting us all up like Christmas lights.

"My Lord," they whispered and bowed their heads. With a stonishment, I realized it was to me.

"Who or what are you?" My voice quivered and I struggled to make it steady.

"We are the Dursvan, bodyguards for your family, Jadewyn Etheros. Alas we failed in our duty to your noble mother and will not make the same error with you."

"You're aliens?"

"Only to this planet. Or plane. I'm not sure which."

"Who are the other ones? The ones that tried to kill me?"

"They are the Druz. Soldiers who fought against your family's dynasty. They want the Seillach pangorum and more importantly, they want you."

"Why?"

"Because you can find anything that is lost, and they have lost the way home. They were exiled from their home, their place of power a thousand centuries ago. They wish it back and you can take them there."

"I think we should go home. Get out of here. We're sitting ducks. Besides, you terminated government agents and now they're after me, too."

"We will take you someplace safe," he said and merged back into the express lanes. Minutes later, we were climbing back up into the sunlight. I recognized the skyline and knew we

were close to dad's precinct. I wanted to yell stop, but I knew that was the first place they would look for me.

The drive to Boston was straight now that the Big Dig was finished; I thought they were headed out to the country in a house hidden in the sticks. Instead, they drove downtown to huge sky rise, pulled into an underground garage where armed security met them. The newcomers opened the door for us and I was escorted gently out into the nearest elevator with them at my elbows. All of them bore the same generic stamp as if they were from the same tribe.

We went to the top floors with the doors opening several times and I glanced at people at work like in any other inner-city offices. We stopped at what must have been the corporate headquarters, which opened onto an atrium straight out of a movie set, complete with fountains, skylights and enough greenery to inspire a jungle. We were led to an office down the hallway that had exposed windows on all three sides.

The desk was a massive thing of amber and honey wood and the man who stood behind it looked like a taller version of the guards. His hair was black, eyes that curious blue and his chin held a dimple deep enough for my finger to fall in. His arms were impressively muscled and hung nearly to his knees, but did not look too long on his tall frame. I could see him in battle armor wielding a sword standing over a naked maiden like Conan of Cimmeria. He came forward and took my hand, turned it over to stare at my abraded wrists and into my eyes.

"My Lord, Jadewyn. It is the blessings of the flame and the Seillach Pangorum that we have, you safe at last."

"Who are you?"

"Eldrich, bring Lord Jadewyn drink, something to wear and a chair," he ordered, and before he finished speaking my rump was planted in an armchair soft and welcoming. He smiled at me "I am Revenal Juris. A commander in the Dursvan forces, yours to command, my Lord Jadewyn."

"Lord of what?" I asked, pulling the edges of the hospital gown down on my knees. My feet were in slipper socks and I was cold. Five minutes later, two women knocked came in, pushing the cart behind a man with an arm full of clothes. They stared at me, giggled and laughed as he handed me, black leather pants, a tight shirt and jacket, all in black or silver tones. There were boots also. Handsome soft leather that speed laced. No socks or underwear.

Self-conscious, I pulled the pants on underneath the gown and then peeled away to expose my torso to his scrutiny. His eyes took in my scars and his fingers traced them lightly. "You have been wounded," he stated.

"Car crash. Collapsed both my lungs. Those are from drain tubes," I said shortly pulling the shirt over my head. I gestured to the carts. "They're not poisoned or drugged, right?"

In answer, he sampled bits of everything and I sat back down and worked my way through both tables. They watched me eat in amazement.

"I had forgotten how a youngling could eat," he marveled.

"Well," I mumbled with my mouth full. "They didn't feed me well the last day or so. I was knocked out."

"Eat all you want. Rest. You are safe here. In the morning, the Elders will speak to you."

"Whatever." I went back to chowing down.

## *Chapter 14*

I had a suite almost to myself and I was alone in the inner bedroom. I was alone in the inner bedroom where the walls were of white marble with a sparkling surface that glowed with ambient shine lighting up the room as bright as overhead lamps. There were veins of gold

through the walls that I suspected were real gold. The crown molding and floor baseboards were of burl wood with twisting holes through it that rang with a melodic hum like a base horn and were icy cold to the touch. The floors were a reddish wood inlaid with knurls that looked like polished eyes and scattered rugs akin to Persian masterpieces graced the large expanse of bare floors. I recognized them from my Mom's drooling over reproductions at Ethan Allan's. The outer rooms were not so fine, underfoot with guards, waiters, maids and courtiers, all intent on servicing my needs and whims. Save for the one thing I really wanted and they couldn't give me back, my Mom and Dad.

The bed was a queen-sized four poster with a deep pile mattress that made me feel as if I was in a boat. I almost needed two steps to get into it. The sheets were satin, and I slid around as if I were greased. The coverlet was filled with feathers and smelled like honey and sunshine, all in a pale gold that complimented the walls. I sank into the mattress and suppressed a giggle as I almost disappeared.

I slept like the dead, never noticed them coming in every two hours to check on me. I didn't notice when they removed my boots and clothes. They let me sleep for six whole uninterrupted hours and woke me by gently rubbing my shoulder.

I turned over, pulled the covers over my head and promptly ignored those trying to wake me. This elicited a stronger response, which consisted of someone pulling the covers off me entirely, and as the cold hit me, I sat up complaining bitterly. "Okay, I'm awake, Mom!" I yelled and paused in confusion as I looked around at a score of strange faces that stared expectantly from all three sides of the bed. "What's up?" I asked the man I knew, the one called Revenal Jurist or something. He stepped forward with a robe.

"We need you to speak to the Elders, Jadewyn," he announced.

"I'll speak to them whoever they are," I muttered under my breath. "Don't know what I'll say, though." I got up disdaining the robe and pulled on the clothing I'd worn the day before. I had no idea what time it was or even what day. When I was finished dressing, I went to the door and stood waiting for them. He opened it and the honor guard surrounded me as I followed them out into the corridor that led deeper into the heart of this massive skyscraper.

It could have been a conference room; it was as large as a ballroom and its ceiling soared over our heads towards what looked like skylights. A huge tree split the middle, growing straight up like a telephone pole before it split into branches like the ribs of an umbrella. The leaves were golden and round, with a curious green spot in the center making it appear that the tree had a million eyes watching softly on those below. It gave off the odor of the air after a thunderstorm, acrid, but not unpleasant, clean and crisp.

As I stepped under it, I noticed two things---that my escort stopped and went around so that they were not beneath the tree's shadow and that as soon as I did, the ting shifted and leaves began to fall from the crown's great height landing in a circle around me. Everything ceased. The sounds of a busy workplace, voices, machines, the rustling of a wind that I had only heard subliminally.

"Well, this is just too weird," I muttered and it got weirder. All of the...men around me dropped to their knees and slapped their hand to the left shoulder in a salute. Sort of like the Romans did to their Centurions.

"Uh, dudes, what's going on?" My voice echoed down the long room and hung out there like a lone crow in the snow. My answers came from behind me, and I swiveled around to stare at four incredibly old men in fancy business suits. They bore a decided resemblance to wise old monkeys. Not dark haired like Revenal but gray, they stood taller than those around me and



clearly were not of the same genetic stock as the Dursvan. Their eyes were a luminous green, a green as deep as ocean water and as mysterious as those depths. Without an iris. Green like my own strange eyes.

“It has been millennium since the Great Tree has seen fit to grant us here favors, My Lord,” the nearest said and bending at the waist in both a reach and a bow, he picked up a handful of the leaves. Handing them out, he dispensed them to the approaching Dursvan, the other Elders and me.

I turned it over and found that it resembled my coin. “What do I do with this?” I watched as the others slowly placed the leaves in their mouths and chewed. They must have been some kind of drug because the looks on their faces were ecstatic and blissful. Only the old dudes did not show such effect as the leaves passed their lips. I was afraid to try it until I noticed that it was melting in my hand and left a tingling that filled me with warmth and a longing for something I could not express.

“You are the Guardian of the Tree, Jadewyn. It is the source of Power for the Seillach Pangorum, the wielder of all strings you so effortlessly follow.”

“What if the tree is destroyed?” I asked and walked up to the trunk. It was larger than I thought and the air around it seemed thicker, richer, more like walking through water. He followed me but came no closer than twenty feet from the smooth iron colored bark. It was as thick around as ten men, straight as an arrow and when I touched it, my hand burned at the amazing heat that rushed up its length. I muffled a scream and tried to pull my hand away. I could not. Struggled.

I fell to my knees and landed on soft grass-like stuff that was the color of rubies. Images flared through my head and I could see them flowing down the tree’s veins into my hand and up my arm to explode behind my eyes with mercy or subtlety. I saw my mother, my birth mother, not a queen or a ruler but a simple woman with a strange predilection for a warrior’s life and as a trainer of soldiers. She was very good at it and there, she met and wooed my father. He was a noble’s son sent to learn the art of warfare and was an apt pupil of both the arts of love and war. So, my mother, Madaras Ethelyn became pregnant with me. An event that never happened with trainees because they were chosen before puberty and treated so that such could not happen. Yet, here I was.

I saw their early years together, felt her joy and happiness as he followed her campaigns. Felt her sorrow when he returned to his family demesnes and she would not go with him. He vowed to return for both of us when the war he fought was over. Instead, word came that he was murdered before he reached his castle’s safety and Druz were on their way to take his son and wife.

She broke her contract, snatched me and ran, ran for a year until that day in the forest where the Druz had cornered and killed her. She had used the last bit of her essence and the Seillach coin to pull both of us away from the Druz assassin and hide in the pit on another plane. It took great power and the essence of a life to travel from one Plane to another. Unless you had the Seillach Coin, the knowledge and the means to use the Power of the Tree to open the Gate.

I understood their language now. In my head was a riotous mix of many languages, giving me a headache that left me sick to my stomach. I felt my hand slip from the trunk and I hugged it to my chest until I could bear to look at it. In the center of the palm was a red burn that looked like the coin. Before my eyes, it faded to become a white scar itching until even that faded. I looked up, saw that the entire assemblage was still gathered at the edge of the tree’s shadow and were staring at me.

“Jadewyn?”

“How much time has passed?” My voice was rusty and hoarse. I sat up wearily.

“I do not understand,” the oldest frowned.

“How long have I been laying here?” I rose to my feet and felt no worse than if I had slept too long.

“You fell down only seconds ago. Since you entered the Tree’s space, it has been only a short time. Mere minutes.”

I stepped out of the thick air and stared into his eyes. I saw no deceit there. “Who are you?”

“I am Oriel, the Keeper of the Tree, the oldest of the Elders. You would call me a...priest or perhaps a scribe. We keep the records and lore of the Tree. To answer your question, the Tree cannot be destroyed.”

“Can it be controlled?” I asked.

He nodded. “You spoke to her?”

I shook my head ruefully. I had a headache, a migraine. “She pushed things into my mind. Images, memories and languages.”

“Follow and I will bring you to our rooms where we will explain the rest and I will arrange for some tea and medication for your headache.”

So off we went towards the end of the hall and a room barely large enough for the entire group. In it was a large table, a few chairs and nothing else.

I sat and the others followed. Oriel spoke to one of those seated and he left, to return presently with a crystal pitcher of water and a bottle of Tylenol, which he opened and sat next to me. I hesitated.

“I assure you, they are not drugs other than what they proclaim to be. I thought you would prefer something from your own experienced plane rather than from your true home.”

“Bring me a sealed bottle,” I said and out the door went the...man. He came back with four still plastic sealed as were several bottles of water. I chose one at random, opened the inner seal and swallowed them dry. I went through the same procedure with the bottles of water and finished them off in four swallows. My stomach gurgled as the water hit it. Oriel raised a hand and images of another existence hovered over the table. He showed me the hone world of the Druz, my own and how they had wreaked havoc on a plane that had known no such warfare in a thousand lifetimes until the Druz had invaded looking for the way to return to their own world.

“Why don’t I just show them the way and exile them on it?” I asked. They stared at me.

“They would not go and only bring their entire world back to as many others so they could destroy those, too.”

I shuddered. Their world was dark and sadistic, not a place I wished even on the worst of this world. “What do you expect me to do?” I asked. “I’m only a fifteen year old kid.”

“You are the Holder, the Wielder of Strings. Through your hands run the life cord of every living thing. You carry the Seillach Pangorum, you are tied to the Tree.” He looked puzzled as if I should have all the answers.

“I don’t know the way to their home...plane. Before a few months ago, I didn’t even know they existed. I don’t know what I’m supposed to do, what you want me to do.” It came out a pathetic wail.

“You will know what is right when the time comes,” he patted my hand as he showed me other images of the life and hierarchy of my mother’s world until I understood the life and culture. Somewhere in the midst of his lessons, I fell asleep.

## Chapter 15

They brought me back to my room and a feast of breakfast goodies were waiting as well as a very stiff military dude in the regulation black uniform I'd seen the other men wearing with pride. This one was fully armed and looked more like a cross between human and Dursvan. He had one electric blue eye and the other was the same green as my own. Really cool looking. He had a stick up his ass and white rings around one arm that looked like one-inch wide plastic bands. He saluted Juris and me with his palm to his left shoulder and dipped his head keeping his eyes on me. They roamed the room and were never still. His face was smooth, pleasant looking with those eerie eyes. There was no divination between the iris and the pupil. His hair was a smooth mix of gray and black. He followed me into my room and I threw myself at the food.

"Who's this?" I asked shoveling in the eggs and bacon.

"Captain Kiannyn. He is a Dursvan Heart Fighter," Oriel smiled. "A---"

"Bodyguard, personal protector," I answered, pulling the new knowledge loose from my overstuffed head. He looked only a few years older than I did; I knew from the cultural stuff I'd acquired that he was both older and stronger than he looked. To have achieved the rank of captain in the Heart Forces, he would have had to master swordsmanship, archery, hand to hand, guns, horsemanship and pretty much what a Navy SEAL for which they trained. I eyed him with new respect. If my mother had had such, she might still be alive.

"These...Druz creeps, how did they find me on...Earth?" I called it that for lack of another word to call this plane. My mother's plane was known as Celene. "So, I'm like what, a Prince, King, or Emperor?" My eyes got huge. Wow. I could rule the world. I found a sausage link. Mmmmm, maple. I took all of them, picked up a plate, fork and chowed down. Several of the soldiers joined me for breakfast, pulling up chairs from around the room.

"Oh no, Lord Jadewyn. We have both a King and an Emperor. You are more of a...war leader, an icon for the troops to rally behind, the power behind our arsenal," Oriel said reaching for a fruit that looked and smelled like a pear but was deep purple.

"War Leader? I know as much about war as I do about crocheting." I wasn't one of those kids who was crushed with WOW or X-box.

He looked at me in puzzlement and then smiled. "You are making a joke."

"Not really," I paused, went inside my head to look for the nearest Druz string and touched it gently. Fire burst into my hand, ran in both directions back up the string to me and down the strings to the heart of the Druz stronghold. Went racing up the lines to jangle somewhere close as I screamed and tried to pull free and could not because I had tied myself to both ends and whatever was at the other end was reeling me in like a fish on the hook.

"Help me!" I screamed and struggled to pull the coin out. As soon as I uttered the words, lights flared, green fire fought against a sea of red and I was blown out of that place to see a glimpse of the Dursvan's startled face as I was pulled into darkness. Dumped onto a cold hard surface so hard that it knocked the air out of me and addled my wits. Scraped my hands and my knees. Rolled over on my back and the cold leached into my fingers, back and inner core. I smelled old oil, dirt, and stale exhaust. Over my head was a darkness lighter than what was around me, I could barely see walls of a pit where the night sky obscured by clouds dimmed a city haze. I knew where I was now. Tried to move and my neck and back protested with a sharp stab of pain to remind me I had broken them not so long ago. I heard the night noises fade, saw the sky grow darker and realized I was fading out, not the other way around.

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Pattering woke me. Gentle pats on my face, hands and body. Cold ones, too. One slid into my mouth and I swallowed. Tasted rain. Not clean, crisp but tasting of the ashy residue of city life. The sky I could see above me was gray and turbulent with streaks of lightning that flared and thunder made the confines of the pit seem both too small and enormous. I had flashbacks of my mother's arms around me, the coppery taste of blood and terror in my mouth and nose.

Rolling over, I was able to push with my arms and sit up, keeping my neck as straight as I could as the moment it tilted, sharp shocks zipped down my back and arms. It burned as if ants were stinging the length of the nerves as if I had whacked my funny bone.

Over to the left was the ladder that fed out of the oil pit, I tested the rungs before I risked my weight on them and slowly, climbed out. Reached the lip and hung there until I could garner the energy to slide the rest of my body over the edge. I was right, I was on the old concrete pads of the closed and abandoned factory; it was in worse shape now than when my Dad had found me here. I hated this place; it brought back old memories of death, despair and abandonment. My parents had said I was too young to remember what had happened to my mother and me in this place, but I did.

No one was wandering about. Most of the buildings had either fallen down or been dismantled. The realty management had left the guard shack at the end of the chain link fence and in it; I found both a telephone and a fire alarm system. Of course, there was no electricity turned on but when I pulled up the receiver, I felt a surge of energy pass through me to the phone and heard the sudden dial tone. I pushed the buttons before I could lose it and heard a harried voice on the other end. I wished for a cell phone but that wasn't going to happen.

"Hello?"

"Murphy?"

There was utter and complete dead silence that I could actually feel. "Who is this?" He sounded tight and suspicious.

"Murphy, it's me."

"You're dead. I went to your funeral. I kissed your dead fucking body."

"No, Murphy. Not yet. I will be though if you don't help me."

"Prove it. Prove who you are," he demanded harshly.

"I have a gold coin, Murph and my mom didn't wear underwear."

"Holy Christ," he whispered. "Where are you?"

"Your phone safe?"

"How do I know? Why would they bug me? You're dead!"

"No, they made it seem like I was. I'm where I started, Murph. Can you come get me?"

"Stay there. I'll be twenty minutes. You need Reilly?"

He was the SWAT paramedic. "Yes."

"How bad?"

"I'm mobile. Sore. Might need a cervical collar."

"I'm coming. Stay out of sight." He hung up the phone without saying goodbye. I huddled under the counter and waited.

Twenty-two minutes later, a blue sports coupe pulled up to the gate in a spray of gravel and two cops in city clothes jumped out. One carried a medic's box and both had guns out and ready for anything. I stood up and hobbled over to them. I'd stiffened up and felt worse than a run over cat. Murphy hugged me gently, set me on the front seat and Reilly went over every inch of me. When he turned my neck, I winced and saw sparks. "Hurts?" he asked.

“Like an electrically short. They said I broke my C3 in the car accident, pinched my spine. How long ago was the car crash, Murph?”

“Five weeks. It was five weeks ago you and your dad were killed.”

“I’ve been missing for five weeks?” I swallowed and he used a penlight in my eyes. His hands were cool as he slipped a cervical collar around my neck and it bit into my chin. “You’ve been dead for five weeks, Jade,” Murphy said soberly. “FBI guys with quiet, understated badges have been nosing around. They took your dad and your body away in a refrigerated truck. They denied it was your dad in the car, said it was either a kidnapper or your accomplice in the murders.”

“It wasn’t the Government people that killed Dad,” I muttered. I winced as I moved on the back seat. Everything ached from my sudden contact with the cement. “It was something called the Druz. Creatures from another plane. They want the coin and me. They want me to bring them home.”

“Will you?” He swung my legs into the car and belted me in.

“No. They’re a warrior race. Once back on their own plane, they’ll just gather up their forces and attack Earth and Celene.”

“Celene?” Both of them got in the car and we drove off. I kept my head down.

“My mother’s home.”

“How bad is he, Reilly?” Murphy asked and shifted into third gear. He hit the highway in minutes and he was heading for the precinct.

“Bad enough for a hospital but I guess that’s out of the question. His neck is probably re-fractured, his eyes are un-equal which means he has a concussion and I felt some crepitus in his side. His pressure is a little low, pulse rapid, lung sounds a little bit sticky. You nauseous, seeing double and having trouble staying awake?” He had to poke me to get a reply. “Jade, stay awake, hey! Boy, wake up!”

“Where are we going?” My eyelids felt so heavy all I wanted to do was sleep.

## *Chapter 16*

I was on the couch in the Lieutenant’s office and somehow, Murphy and Reilly had managed to call the whole team in without waking me. I opened my eyes and fourteen sets of serious eyeballs and was taken aback. “Whoa,” I breathed.

“Looks pretty healthy for a dead boy, don’t he?” Smitty asked. He grinned and it made his eyes crinkle, his bald forehead lifted those bushy eyebrows that looked like a dead squirrel had dropped his tail on his head.

“Am I glad to see you dudes,” I said and moved my legs. Stopped as a massive cramp of abused muscles seized me worse than an engine without oil. I groaned. Reilly slid his arms under my shoulders and eased me into a sitting position. Another brought me a glass of water and a small yellow pill. I turned my head creakily towards Reilly.

“Take it, Jade. It’s flexeril, it’ll help with the stiffness and pain. Your whole body is black and blue. You’ve been asleep for six hours on a couch you’re going to be stiff.”

“I feel like shit. I also did a three point landing on that concrete pad.” I groaned and swallowed without water.

“You look like it, too. Tell us, where the hell have you been?”

“I was kidnapped by the FBI, DIA, and NSA, one of those alphabet soup agencies. Some secret branch of the Air Force. They did all kinds of tests on me, made me find a lost airplane with live missiles out in the desert and then sent me to Boston. Some nuts from MIT were going to dissect me alive, study my brain. I tried to get free,” I shuddered at the memory, whispered, “I didn’t want to die, Murphy. Not like that. Then, the van we were in was rear-ended, flipped and these dudes---they all look alike, called the Dursvan, rescued me and took me to this ginormous skyscraper in downtown Boston. You should see it; it had this enormous tree inside the atrium and a lobby like a jungle with a fountain.”

“I’ve seen it. The Celene Foundation. They’re a multi-billion dollar corporation, are into gemstones, gold, real estate and shipping. It’s run by a confederation of old men and a sharp CEO named Revenal Juris.”

“That’s the name of the man who rescued me. Revenal Juris,” I said slowly. “He calls me Lord Jadewyn, said I was some kind of war leader.”

“Well, you’re doing a great job so far, Lord. You’ve broken your neck and nearly broke your ribs and back. You need to rest. We’re trying to decide what the safest place to stash you is.”

“Until when? The US government and twin alien forces want me. You think you can keep me safe? Good luck. I figure I have maybe two days to stay alive.”

“Maybe we need to contact these Dursvan and let them hide you,” Murph said.

“I’m sure they’ll be showing up here soon enough,” I commented sleepily. Seems that’s all I’ve been wanting to do lately. My stumbling feet dragged as the two of them half carried/walked me into the precinct’s detective division and hustled me to the SWAT locker room. I missed the gaping faces on the detectives but saw them as they trailed us into SWAT HQ. Murph picked me up, set me on the cot in the holding cell, pulled my legs up, and threw a blanket over me. I vaguely heard him tell the others I was out for the night due to the drug he’d given my injuries and me. He would take turns watching me and expected they would help. I rolled over ponderously, felt the collar sticking me and went to sleep; even the annoyance of it wasn’t enough to bar me from dreamland.

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Four ugly faces that needed shaving stared back at me. Two sets of brown eyes, one blue and one gray. One of them had egg crumbs on the corner of his mouth and all four needed some serious mouth washing. I gagged and choked back vomit, tried to raise myself and groaned in misery and self-pity. Every inch of me complained in some fashion. I felt like the entire SWAT team had sacked me.

“You dudes need to do some oral hygiene,” I complained. “Gimme a hand.” Four sets of hands pulled me up and my head swam. I held on until the vertigo left me and Reilly checked me over again. “Stomach still pukey?”

I nodded, swallowing bile. He handed me more pills. “More flexeril and some Tylenol for the headache. I would give you some vicodan but it’d knock you loopy and I’m not sure if having you semi-conscious is safe. We decided to case this Celene Foundation, check it out and see if you’d be safer there. Federal cops are already nosing around the precinct.”

I tried to climb to my feet and he held me. “Anyone seen those big guys with the gorilla arms?”

“A couple of them tried to access the Loo’s office this morning. He was out on a scene,” Murph grinned. I was surprised, the Loo hardly ever left his office, and he was always accessible to everyone. Unless he wanted to hide from his wife.

“He forgot his cell phone, too,” Murph added so I knew he was avoiding his boss, the Chief of Police.

“You dudes have been here all night? With me?” I had a huge lump in my throat. “You know you might end up like my Dad?”

“We might get hit by the falling debris from the Space Station, too,” Smitty sneered. “What’s an alien assassin to a Boston SWAT Sniper team?”

“They play with lightning bolts,” I mumbled. Looked up. “You got anything to eat in this place?”

Creason handed me a MacDonalds bag. Inside was a Big Breakfast with hot cakes and sausage. I held it and burst into tears. Every one of them hugged me and patted my back, a team of hard-assed snipers cried with me. When I could stop, I dug at my eyes and wiped them on my shirt. Mumbled my thanks and swallowed a biscuit. It made my stomach squirm and twist as if I’d swallowed worms.

When I was able to walk, they stayed close to my side as if they expected me to wobble and fall down. “Where am I going? I suppose the whole 4-7 knows I’m here?” I tried to pretend that I hadn’t bawled like a five year old. I spotted the Loo coming down the hall and his face looked gloomier than usual. He jerked his thumb towards the bathroom and all four bundled me that way without losing step. From the locker room, we exited into the service hallway and down to the evidence lockers, out to the garage and downtown.

“Take him outta here,” the Loo ordered. “The quicker the better and don’t tell me where so I don’t have to lie.” He retreated to his office.

“You guys are in so much shit,” I murmured. “If anyone sees you in a squad car, they’ll think you got busted back to Patrol. Hell, if you’re caught with me, you’ll be lucky to get busted to Patrol. They might just kill you.”

“Shut up, Jade.”

“Hey, you’re talking to a...Lord,” I complained. “I could just send you to the dungeons or something. Where are we?”

“Harvard and Lawson. Four blocks from the Celene Towers.”

“Anyone following us?”

“Not that I can spot. Who follows a police cruiser?”

“You got a point.” I sat up and peered out the window. His erratic driving was making me carsick, especially when he slammed on the brakes because of a pile-up in front of us. Two yellow cabs had hit and were tangled together, the drivers screaming obscenities at each other. Their passengers were adding to the mess. Traffic was at a standstill as the taxis had blocked the intersection. The light pole was hanging loose overhead and the cycle was off, both sides red. One of the dudes got out to direct traffic and clear a space so we could get through. Smitty was driving and he hit the lights and siren but it only added to the noise and confusion. People started screaming. I heard the sound of gunfire and something rocked the car. Smitty cursed, said, “Stay inside! Don’t get out and keep your head down!” He left me.

## **Chapter 17**

Things came down the avenue. Things that weren’t human, or even of this world. They looked like freight cars with legs and teeth, tossed people and cars aside like matchbox toys or squashed them underfoot until they resembled prickly pear jelly. I saw the team open fire on them with their sidearms which was as about effective as throwing eggs at them. Heard them yell for me to get back and shuddered as Andrews and Smitty were crunched into hamburger. I scrambled out of the car before I could be squeezed out as toothpaste in time to spot the boxcar

things being ridden by Druz. Stood there on the hood of the car with the coin in my hand. I chanted the words; felt the stone glow and bolts of green flame pulsed from my hand to bore holes through the boxes until they resembled Swiss cheese. With gooey marshmallow insides. Their innards were gross. Slimy, sticky and smelled worse than rotten cheese and a jock's cup after a three -day old road kill. When they went up their riders went up with them, but two got past me, and these things big as they were, could turn on a dime. Came back to gallop near me. They had things like tentacles near their mouths that could shoot out of their jaws and coiled around cars picking up SUVs with ease. Threw them at me. My green flame goo dissolved metal faster than I could say shit, and while my attention was forward on them, tentacles attacked me from out of the rear. Wrapped around my arms and snugged them into my body so that I could not move my hands. Another pried into my mouth and gagged me so that I couldn't speak. I was lifted into the air and smashed into the side of the building. All I could think about was the Spiderman movie where Doc Oc beat up Spidey.

I was grateful Smitty had made me keep on the collar, if it hadn't been cradled in the stiff plastic, my neck would have snapped like a pencil. Wasn't helping the rest of my body, though. I felt my shoulder crunch and the pain made me loopy.

I heard vaguely, the sound of a Druz screaming at the thing to drop me, not kill me, and it obliged by dumping me from twenty feet up in the air. The Druz continued to screech at the thing and it caught me in its arms before I hit a parked car or the concrete. Those blue eyes glared down at me. I still couldn't say anything, still had a hunk of tentacle jammed in my mouth and more wrapped me from knees to neck. He saw my eyes blink.

"Ah, you're still alive," he said in a voice of gravel stuck in like a tin can. "Soldiers! To me!" He ordered, and a score of his men surrounded us. He threw me over his shoulder and pulled out a long, circular knife.

Murphy and Reilly screamed my name. The Druz snorted and sliced my calf. It flared icy and then the pain burned. I bucked and tried to get free, to scream and all I could do was bite into that rubbery mass of limb. It tasted awful and tingles of numbness filled my mouth. I swallowed the acrid tasting saliva and as it flowed, it brought more of that numb feeling to my body. I watched him milk the wound and let blood from my leg drip. It did not fall to the ground, but rather floated in the air. Gathered itself into the shape of a doorway and glowed as if it was bloodied fire, flames trickling off its edges. He pushed the gate open with his blade as it glistened, glistening with my blood. Where the blade, blood and gate met, it hissed and sparked.

"Hurry!" He ordered to his men. "The Gate won't stay open long with this small offering!"

He was the first through it, and when the last...man-thing leaped in, I heard Murphy's despairing voice and the gate snapped shut on someone's heels. Someone or something that didn't make it from the abrupt cut off scream.

We emerged in a hallway, gray, misty, with holes in the mist that seemed to be like doorways; and the one who carried me hurried past hundreds with his troops before they settled on one no different from any of the others. Through this doorway, we exited into a great hall that looked remarkably, like Grand Central Station only with the lights turned down low. At the far end of the room was a chair, a simple chair, made of wood that glowed like that creepy fungus you saw growing only in the depths of a dark cave. The whole place smelled like ozone and bit at the back of my throat, made my eyes burn and water. I was afraid I would vomit and choke on it.

The soldier carrying me dropped me at the foot of the throne, and I stared up at the face of the ruling individual. He was and a Druz even larger than the usual, large enough to double as



King Kong and as ugly. He kicked me in onto my stomach and spoke in his tongue; I had no trouble understanding the harsh language or his words. "Where is the Seillach Pangorum?"

I couldn't answer him. With the gag in my mouth, nothing could emerge but that didn't satisfy him so he kicked me again to roll me across the floor as if I were a log bound for the fireplace.

"Take him to the pit chamber and make him ready for the Questioners," he ordered and I was heaved up by the bonds on my chest and thrown back over his shoulder. His muscles felt like hard wood, and they smelled like yaks. He marched backwards through the hall and took the left-hand turn into a narrow corridor to descend several stone staircases into a wide hallway, broad enough for four horses to ride abreast. The rooms were open, except for barred fronts. These chambers were below the level of the corridor and hundreds could march abreast even with animals. There were rooms off that and most were open save for a few with barred grilles. The walls, floors and ceilings were all of stone, a bland tan that showed blood and scorch marks quite clearly. In several places, I saw the outline of human bodies and what had been done to them showed up as a road map of torture. Guttering torches kept the place semi-lit and left black streak marks on the wall and ceiling. The chamber floors were dropped down half a level from the hall he trod so that we could look down on those that housed many unlucky occupants. Not many were alive and those that were ignored us as we passed.

He peered into several cells and chose one that was empty. It looked no more special than any of the others save that it was at the end of the hallway and near a door that went up from the glimpse, I saw through the open planking. He carried me in the room down a set of short steps and laid me on the wooden table. Held me there with one massive hand on my chest. Presently, three more Druz wandered in, dressed in long robes splattered with blood. On bands on their foreheads were silver circlets that pressed into the flesh and made indents, made them look even more ugly and ape-like. Out came more of those round knives and he sliced off the tentacles replacing them with chains made of wood on my wrists and ankles. I raised my eyebrows at that. Surely, wood was easy to break. They left the gag in.

"Ironwood," he grinned at me, his teeth were not so friendly and definitely not human or friendly. "It's spelled to prevent axes or fire from harming the chains and cuffs." He ran his hands over my body, disrobing me as he did so, ignoring my feeble attempts to deny him. Lingered on the cut on my calf, his huge fingers squeezed completely around it so that fresh blood oozed out. I winced, it burned like hot ice. To my astonishment, he licked my blood off his fingers and his eyes rolled back in his head. He shuddered as if he was aroused. "Ahh," He groaned. "So good, so pure, so much power imbued in his blood." He bent his head to my cut and I felt his teeth sunk in as he sucked. My entire existence dwindled down to that spot and I felt my life being pulled through it into his throat. My struggles became null as I ceased.

The others beat him until they made him let go, knocked him into a corner and worked him over until he was unconscious or dead. I felt light-headed, cold and lethargic. One of the others lifted my eyelids and felt the pulse in my neck. "Is he still alive? If Gleygus drained his power, we are all dead."

"Yes. Gleygus drank much before we stopped him. The Lord warned us that his blood was like an elixir, it has the power to seduce men. We must warn the Priests, they alone can guard him against the Blood lust. I feel it working on me, even now. Bind his wound, lest he bleed more and tempt us." They wrapped the dead Druz's sash around my calf and left me alone as two stood guard outside the bars. Once again, I was alone and at the mercy of my enemies.

## Chapter 18

I lay there for hours, not quite conscious yet, not all the way out. I remember shivering uncontrollably as if I were lying on a block of ice. So when the warmth of someone's hand touched me, I ached to have it around me, holding me. "I'm so cold," I tried to say and couldn't because I was still gagged. Muttered in my head. My teeth chattered. against the rubbery vine. The hands moved to my wrists and fumbled there.

"Can you help me?" A voice whispered in my ear and their mouth tickled. The hairs on my nape. I shuddered and they felt it. I forced my eyes open and stared into green eyes, thickly lashed in a face incredibly filthy with shoulder length hair and matted dreadlocks.

"Who are you that merits a bed in the special Inquisitor's room?" It looked like a young boy in black rags, cut down from a Druz uniform. I tried to answer. "Never mind. We have to get you out of here before they suck your blood. Have you a weapon?"

I opened my hand and heard his gasp as he touched the white scar of the coin; his fingers went to the gag in my mouth and removed it. Carefully from its grip inside and out. I spat weakly to get rid of the horrible brassy taste and coughed until my eyes watered.

"Don't use it," he said, and covered my hand. He laid his palm across my lips. His bones were very fragile; my eyes widened. He was a girl, but not a Druz---a girl like me with the same honey gray hair and enormous green eyes. "If you loose the Seillach's aura, it will call the entire Priesthood down on you and with you bound by the Tree, you'll die. And me with you."

"I'm too banged up to move. Can you carry me?"

"First, we have to get you loose. The Ironwood cuffs do not break, nor burn or, nor cut."

"Then how will you remove them?"

She pulled up the chain where it was bolted to the table. "They can, however, be frozen." She closed her eyes, muttered something and pulled from her pockets a small vial of glass. She opened the top carefully and plumes of smoke drifted up. Just as carefully, she trickled some on one link of each bond, and then whacked it with a small geologist's hammer. Pieces of wood went flying like shrapnel as the frozen links shattered. She picked up each piece and tucked it into her pouch. She helped me sit up and held me while my head swam. "I smell your blood."

I stared. Not exactly what you'd expect the first chick to get a hold of you was going to say. "One of those dudes sucked the blood out of my leg. Where the other one cut me." I missed the look of horror on her face as I pulled up my leg and stared at the sash tied around my calf. "I don't feel so good."

"That's because you're low on blood, covered in black and were poisoned by the Druz. Their bite is toxic." Her lips were thin and grim. She held me with one arm around my shoulders, used the other to dig through her pockets, and pulled out another small bottle. Smelling it, she opened and poured it down my throat before I could protest. It tasted awful, like cat piss and milkweed.

"Ugh," I pushed her hand away. "That's disgusting! Gross! What is it?"

"It's to make you stronger. Now, get up. We have a long way to go."

I felt numb yet capable of movement. I slid my feet to the stone floor and wobbled. "Who are you?"

"Call me Zip. Let's go."

"Go where?" I wanted to giggle. I couldn't see where we could go except through the bars and I was sure the big ugly ones had locked those. Besides, I sort of remembered them chaining me to this table. "Wait a minute. How did you get through the bars?"

"I didn't. Come on." She studied me. "It's not supposed to make you act like this," she muttered as I took a step on rubber legs. I could vaguely sense pain in the background, but it wasn't enough to stop me.

"What's your name, Seillach Carrier?" She asked abruptly.

"Jade. Jadewyn James." I giggled. "You smell, girl. You don't smell girly. You are a girl, right?" My hand of its own volition went to her chest and I felt tits---boobs---small, pert, and soft but definitely boobs. I searched for a nipple and she slapped my hands away and said something that sounded like a curse yet I heard the smile in her voice.

"Let's go."

"Go where?" I looked around the cell and saw only three walls of greasy stained beige stone, the table with the table, chains and the barred entrance. She went to the corner of the wall and leaned on it, and half of it swooshed quietly back to reveal a dark passage lit by smoking torches that burned with a greasy flame that was cold. I rolled my eyes. Secret passages. What else? She pushed me along and once inside, shut the hidden door with both hands and then stood there staring at me.

"Just because we're hidden doesn't mean we're safe. Come on, I have to reach the depths before they find out you're gone."

"I don't understand any of this," I complained as she grabbed what was left of my shirtfront and dragged me along. I limped; my calf ached even through the mask of the painkiller. She took me through so many twists and turns that I was hopelessly lost without me reading my stings. I tugged on one and the reaction I got was so discordant that I realized it was probably not a good idea to try to read the lines in this place.

By the time she stopped, we were in caverns deep below the ground, in a world so bizarre and unique that I felt as if I'd fallen into Wonderland. Huge spires of crystal rose from floor to ceiling, waterfalls of rock frozen in Gothic splendor, an immense pool of brilliant blue water that reflected back at us with millions of a million images of the wonders around us. But not just clear crystal colors, these ranged from pink all the way to deepest midnight, it was that crystal cave in Mexico built on a scale only Disney's mind could have envisioned. The light was soft, diffuse coming from an unknown source. Yet clear enough so that I could discern the lashes on her cheeks. Long and black as night. She sat me down on a stump of sapphire rock and went about putting up a camp of sorts with a, sleeping bag, water bottle, a camp stove, first aid kit, a pillow, extra blankets and food. I waited passively to see if she was going to pull out a sink or a CD player. Maybe a TV.

"Take off your clothes. Or what's left of them," she said and I gaped at her. "Your rags. Take off your clothes; I need to see your wounds."

All I had left on me was a ripped pair of sweats and a sleeve. The sweats had come from Murph's war bag. Slowly, I stood up, pulled off the top and rolled the legs up to my crotch, refusing to drop everything in front of her. I wasn't wearing any underwear. She looked at my bruises and the cut with evident teeth marks; it was turning green and with nasty fluid oozing out of the fang marks.

"It's infected." She went to the lake, dunked rags in the water and came back to my side. Inside the first aid box were items much the same as on my plane---, antibiotic cream, gauze, alcohol wipes, syringes, bottles and vials of pills and drugs, antiseptics. She opened one of her own glass vials, saturated a gauze pad and wiped off the cuts. It stung and I could feel it worming its way under the skin. "The pilaster will eat at the infection and slow the Druz poison."

"Poison? I've been poisoned?" I felt a sudden gut wrenching that tore through the painkiller.

"Don't you know anything?" She turned her head and I raised my arm to gasp as the shoulder I bounced with a building reminded me not to use it. "Selwyn? Eilwynn?"

Two more figures came out of the darkness, both had the dark gray hair and green eyes. We stared at each other. Both men were older than I was and from their looks, related to the dirty female. Both looked like of it, capable warriors and wore the elite black uniform of the Dursvan Forces. Their insignia was missing and pale patches marked where they had been.

"Who is he, Zip?" The younger asked as his face came out of shadow. He asked it harshly as if he were afraid of the answer.

"Jadewyn." She held up my hand so that a stray bolt of light illuminated the scar. Their intake of breath was the last thing I heard for a while.

## *Chapter 19*

"Is he well?" I knew that voice, recognized the smell.

"Murphy?" I struggled to get up, but several hands pushed me back onto a padded mat.

"Jade. Stay still. You're sick. Feverish. You need to rest and let Zyperia take care of you."

"Murphy, how, where—" I struggled to make myself understood and to understand.

"I jumped through the gate after you, Jade. Followed. Hid. Found the others here. Go to sleep, we're safe enough underneath here."

"Not safe. They've tasted my blood. They can track me." Waves of fever roiled through me and I was so thirsty, everything ached. I lifted my hand and in it, the coin blazed; I rubbed my fingers across it and tried to call forth its magic, yet none came. Her face hovered over mine; her hands closed my fingers over the coin.

"Your friend has brought some of your medicines, Lord Jadewyn."

Murphy raised my head up and eased the collar back on; he brought water to my lips and helped me swallow.

"I'm going to give you a shot of Vancomycin and steroids, some morphine, Jade. It'll make you feel better."

I felt a coolness on my side and then a sharp bite of a needle. Then nothing. "He's getting thinner, won't eat. I don't know what else to do," the girl's voice whispered. "Are your medicines working?"

"I don't know. His temp is still up there, his pulse is racing. I've run out of antibiotics. Only thing left I know of is to remove the affected part, but I'm sure as hell not amputating his leg. Jade, you've got the coin, use it to heal yourself. If you die, it won't matter what the hell happens."

I mumbled something and the coin glowed in my hand, lit up the cavern, so that sparks bounced around as if a pinball machine had lit up.

"What's it doing? Jade, can you feel it doing anything?" Murphy slapped my cheek gently, but it wasn't until she whacked me a good one and lifted my head off the pillow that I opened my eyes. Everything was blurry and had a yellowish tinge to it. Their faces look filthier than ever if that was possible. Murphy had a beard and his hair was nearly long enough to put in a ponytail.

"Jesus. You look awful, Murph," I whispered, and he laughed, the dimple in his cheek evident. I had a sense he hadn't laughed in a while. She looked disgruntled and laid her palm on my brow.

"How do you feel?"

I ignored her. "How long have I been laying here, Murph?"

He shrugged. "My watch doesn't work here and there is no light and day. I don't know how long. A long time if you go by hair growth." He flicked my own. It was long enough to braid.

"I'm hungry."

She handed me a bowl of soup. It smelled halfway decent. I took a cautious sip, it went down easily, hit the bottom of my belly and I curled around the core of warmth. I finished the rest of the bowl and handed it back to her. Waited. It stayed down. I tried a drink of water, it felt like ambrosia to my tissues. They made me stop after four glasses. Of course, then I had to go piss and it was Murphy's duty to haul me over to a corner of the cave where there was a hole, but did double duty, no pun intended, as the latrine.

"You okay?" He asked for the tenth time as I shuffled back to my bed on the cavern floor.

"I feel okay," I told him and sat down next to the girl. She was somewhat cleaner or I was now as dirty and smelly as they were, and used to it. "Who are you...people?" I questioned, and she answered me, her hand on my wrist.

"My name is Zyperia, called Zip. I was captured by the Druz some time ago but escaped to the caverns. My parents sent warriors to find me. These two, Selwyn and Eilwynn are all that are left of the team. They managed to track me here, but are unable to raise the gate to return us."

"To Celene?" I asked.

"Anywhere. The Druz have been furiously patrolling all the planes and gates this last year. Now we know why. The Seillach has been activated. You were found," she told me.

"Me? Your great war leader?" I snorted. "I'm lousy at chess and checkers. The only remote talent I have is to find something lost."

"You can trace the path to Druz? To Celene?"

"Once I locate the string, I can reel it to wherever it goes," I admitted. "I've found people, places and things. I've never been lost."

"But you've never opened a gate through your string?"

"No. I've never known there were...worlds beyond my own," I admitted.

"The minute you touch the Druz world string, it will jangle and resonate all the way to the Lord Overseer's notice. They will track you back down it to where you stand. You will have mere minutes to open the door."

"Why would I want to go to Druz? I want to go home."

She shook her head. "Home, wherever that is, is no longer safe for you, Jadewyn. Even now, the Druz will have invaded your world and usurped it. No, it is safer to reach for Celene as soon as you can."

"Will I need blood to open a Gate?" I looked at my leg and saw that it was pale, wasted from the bite up as if the muscle had melted away.

"No. That is not a requirement for a Seillach Warrior. You can force the gate open with the coin, your will and the way."

"How?"

"How do you find lost things?" She queried. I reached into that part of me, and looked. Hidden within the coils were twisting and churning lines. I saw a quick twist of a pale string that looked no different than many others save that it sang a soft song like the notes of a silver bell, and I reached for it. I was distracted by a dozen other strings—one of a blood red hue I knew were lives important to me and somehow familiar. I did not want to touch them but gently pushed

them aside and firmly grasped the crystal-toned string. It quivered in my hand and wiggled like the end of a broken steel cable, wanting to be hidden and break free. Twisted around the Celene line was a darker string with the flavor of Druz and once my hand rang the crystal note, it sent vibrations along the darker line. We could feel the alarm around us; all four of us knew that they were now alerted.

I tugged, saw the destination and opened my eyes. They saw me standing with my hand on a beam of light that passed through the wall of crystalline rock, which glowed as if lit from within. I laughed. Here before us was an ancient Doorway and I had the key.

In my other hand, the coin glowed iridescent green. I turned to look at the four of them. "Take hold of me. We're going through the Gate."

I felt them take hold of my clothing, stepped forward and my hands where the first thing to disappear into the shimmering flames. Behind me, I heard the screams of frustrated warriors who found our hiding hole seconds too late.

## Chapter 20

The string I held in my hand throbbed and broke apart as we flew out of nothingness onto a marble floor covered with rugs that looked like woven grass and smelled of flowers. Columns of yellow gold stones rose around us like the nave of the church. Yet there was no ceiling just an open sky above, blue, with a hint of green in it. The long processional led to a raised dais and on it was a table set with chairs. There was a huge party seated and standing around it. Before we rose to our feet, armed Dursvan and green-eyed men surrounded us. They did not look happy. None of us moved from the floor until Zip turned her head and spoke what I took to be her language.

She said, "I am Zyperia, Selwyn and Eilwynn are with me. Jadewyn James and his friend."

The weapons, short staffs with open ends raised and the blue eyes behind them devoured us. Then, one raised her to her feet and others helped the Warriors up. Officials hurried down to our group and began to babble; I raised my hands to my ears and tried to sort it all out. Murphy was next up and stood under guard until she pushed their weapons down. He in helped me to my feet and I had to hold onto him until my head settled. "You okay, Jade?" He looked worried. Two men even taller than I stepped forward and took my hand, looking at my palm.

"Your mother?" He questioned, and I understood him.

"Ethelyn Madaras," I answered. "My name is Jadewyn James."

He looked me over. "You followed the string to this world?"

"Through the Crystal Gate," I sagged against Murphy and many hands held me. "I'm tired."

"You did what no warrior has accomplished in millennium. You traveled the Crystal Way, opened the Gate sealed for centuries."

"The Druz won't find and use it?" I asked, worried.

He shook his head and gestured to the dais. His men pushed me gently towards the nearest chair. "I am Lord Belywyn, commander of the Celene war force, second to the King." He turned to Zip and her friends. "My lady, it is with heartfelt joy I welcome you and your guardians home. You will be escorted to the healers, and thence to your rooms." He turned back to me as I was eased into a chair like a chaise lounge and laid out as if I was waiting for a Margarita. He knelt at my side, his hand on my chest and over my heart. "My Lord, a healer will see to you also. Rest. As soon as you are able, we will discuss your plans for this war."

"Plans for this war?" I leaned on one elbow. "I'm not some military genius, Lord—Belywyn. I'm only a 16-year-old kid who lost his way. I don't know anything!"

Murphy hushed me. "Jade, you're tired, hurt. In over your head. Get some sleep and we'll talk in the morning. You are where you wanted to be right? You managed to get away from a horde of dudes out to harm you, right? You have some instincts, let them help you."

"Murph, I want to go home," I whined, and he patted me on the shoulder.

"So do we all, Jade."

"You are home, Lord Jadewyn. It will look brighter in the morning. I will bring the healer."

My hand burned and the coin was there, glowing in the palm of my hand like a miniature sun.

"Ohh," whispers built to a crescendo around us as the beauty of the stone turned everything to emerald. I felt the entire chorus of strings moan and struggled to control it. My hand curled around the coin and covered one with the other. The light turned dark as another sought to control it.

"Druz!" I gasped. "Trying to force me to bring them forth! My blood calls to them!"

The girl pushed away from her escort, and came to my side, putting her hands on mine. I felt her magic join mine, her strength shored up my own. Little by little, we pushed back the mass of men creeping towards me.

My light snapped back, the strings uncoiled and retreated as my blood cooled. Sweat beaded her brow, and she looked worse than filthy, more than pale yet she managed a smile. "You have a strength that is rare and honest, Jadewyn James. You wield the Strings with the sensitivity of the Harpist."

She kissed my forehead and I felt the hot flash of blood rush my face, but not one laughed at me. They led her away, offered her helping hands, but she pushed them back and walked proudly beside her two body men.

"Oh crap," I said and sank back into the cushions. I vaguely felt other hands on me, but wasn't quite in the present.

\* \* \* \* \*

I woke up in a strange place, a small room that consisted of the bed and nothing else. It was a bed like no other – like an island on which I floated, it smelled of exotic spice and fanciful dreams. I felt cradled in luxury, and did not want to move. I wore only a flimsy white robe and a pad around my calf, was clean, my hair washed and neatly braided. I felt okay. No longer tired. I was hungry and thirsty. I had to use the restroom, but the moment I thought about getting up, the bed slowly moved and rolled me to its edge where I slid my feet out and touched the floor. As soon as I stood up, the whole bed moved away from me, folded up and disappeared into the wall.

"At least I don't have to make it," I muttered. In its place was a small closet door and when I pulled it open, I saw nothing but a blank wall. "Huh. Some kind of weird Murphy bed."

"My Lord Jadewyn?"

I turned my head and there was a Dursvan and one of the Lords I'd seen at the table. They bowed. "Are you ready to break your fast? Join us?"

"I could use the restroom." I looked around, his bigger room. It looked like a lobby, complete with empty waiting rooms, and benches. He pointed to another closet door and when I opened it, I found the commodities. Pretty much the same in all worlds. Used it, washed my hands and joined them.

"Hungry? We have a repast waiting at the War Room."

"You are?" He was young with his hair pulled back so that I could see his face and the shape of his head.

"I am Janorwyth Selwyn, a Second Commander in the Line Forces. This Dursvan is Col. Chrysos. He is cousin to the bodyguard who will join you presently."

"That Capt. Kiannyn?"

"Yes. He tried to follow you and could not breach the Gate."

"He didn't get hurt, did he?"

"No. But that is his role, Lord Jadewyn to protect you. Come, it is time to eat." He led me on a gentle stroll back to the war room and everyone stood up as we wandered down to the table where I was seated in the center. Warlords stood around me and explained the meaning of the board laid out on the surface. I saw navies massed on two great inland seas and both mounted forces, infantry and something called the winged battalion, which I assumed were some sort of planes. "Where are these forces and where will this war be fought?" I questioned with no knowledge of the name of the area where the Armed Forces waited.

"On Celene. The Druz have managed to pull their armies through a gate from Dursvan to the Plains of Keogh. It is only a week's march from here. If we do not stop them there, they will be at the gates to the city."

"And the Dursvan world?" I asked and he looked taken aback at my question. I explained hurriedly. "What technical or military use do they want from Dursvan?"

Col. Chrysos answered. "It is a power source that the Druz use to open the gates, and is only a few planes from here. As is the world, you came from. Their power sources are nearly unlimited and the Druz have learned to tap into it."

"Electrical?"

"No. Magnetic. Do your people and government not notice the fluctuations in your Poles and fields?"

I snorted. "They blame everything on global warming. Where does the power come from that fuels the coin?"

"The coin? Oh, you mean the Seillach Pangorum. The Tree taps into the force that holds the universe together, that binds the strings and holds all. Say, the life force of every living thing down to the minutest particle. That is the source of power you hold. You can use only what you can control." He stared at me. "You can control more than any living creature born, Lord Jadewyn. In all recorded histories of all the planes and worlds we reach, no one has wielded the power to make the Seillach Pangorum, your coin, glow green or make the Tree bloom. That is why the Druz want you and your coin. With you, they control the life force of the universe. With you, they will re-create their world and make it dominant. With you, they will crush every living thing of beauty and freedom under their curse."

I sighed. All this on my shoulders and before breakfast. People turned the tabletop over and began to replace it with plates, baskets and tureens of food. I buried my face in my plate and ate my way through the buffet line.

## **Chapter 21**

After the big meal, they took me out on a sort of hovercraft over the top of the city. It bore a decided resemblance to a fairytale village with castle towers, taverns, thatched roofs and medieval type buildings. Everything was clean, pretty, and built of rose pink brick and honey colored stone. Flags flew from the tower tops, the fields around the city were emerald green, and there were parks dotting the interior streets. We flew towards the setting sun and the mountains,



which gleamed purple in the distance capped, by white snow. The air smelled of pine and cinnamon and struck a chord in my soul.

"Fangmoor," I murmured, and the Colonel smiled.

"Your mother spoke of the Eternal Wood?"

"I remember a sort of lullaby. She sang of Fangmoor," I reminisced.

"Your mother came from there."

"Where are we going?"

"Out to the edge of the battlefield. So you can see the depth of the danger."

"Ahh."

He was silent the rest of the flight. The pilot set down at the edge of the forest before it opened on a plateau filled with tents, horses and men clearly from different worlds. We were met by officers and one I remembered as the captain only a few years older than I was.

"My Lord," his face lightened. "It swells my heart to see you safe and returned. I tried to follow you, but the Gate shut before I could enter."

"I'm glad you're okay, too. Where are the Druz?"

"They are still on the other side of the Gate, massing for an attack. They will not cross until they are ready."

"Where is the Gate?" I looked around, could see nothing that looked large enough for a massed army to burst forth. They pointed to the mountain. I saw a ridge halfway up its length, inaccessible to those below, but a perfect vantage point for an army to rush down to the troops on the flats.

"Let me guess, the entire Ridge is the Gate?" They nodded. I turned around and studied the terrain, saw the river meandered along the bottom of the mountain and through the valley.

"They can only come through the Gate?"

"Yes. They had no other way into this plane unless you create a new Gate."

"There is none other than this one? What about the one I opened in the... Palace?"

"It is not a Palace but the Collegium. No, that gate is... was not able to open. Unless you open it again, nor is it large enough to permit a force great enough to damage anything."

"What weapons do you control?"

"Follow me. I will take you to the armory and the weapons yard."

I received a tour of those places and watched as warriors fought with swords, bows, those round tubes that shot out bursts of light. They burned with an energy that destroyed like a cold laser. Others had bands on their arms, sending explosions in the air like sonic booms. Their winged force was just that – men on beasts with wings like flying dragons that actually did shoot fire. Temperamental beasts, they were hard to aim and fickle, would not fly in wet weather, nor liked to get their feet wet. I liked the cavalry the best, always had a thing for horses and admired the sleek equines in colors both mundane and magical.

"Do you ride, Lord Jadewyn?" The captain asked as he patted the nose of a blue gelding.

"Not as much as I would like," I sighed. "I know enough to get me into trouble."

"The lady Zyperia is an excellent horsewoman."

"Just who is she? Some kind of princess, noble lady?" I asked casually.

"She is of the Upper Courts," he returned his eyes slyly amused.

"She wash up good?" He looked at me puzzled. "Is she pretty?"

"Some have called her such." His eyes lifted. "You have only seen her in filth. Ahh. You will be pleasantly surprised, tonight."

"What's tonight?" I turned to retrace my steps to the HQ tent, was saluted as I entered the flap and found the Lord Belywyn. He told me to sit and handed me a goblet filled with what looked tasted like raspberry fizz, but with a slight kick.

"Tonight is your introduction to the King's Court, the Emperor and your family."

"I have family?"

"Of course. Did you think your mother was the only one in your line?"

"I didn't know. She died when I was two maybe three years old. Did you know my father?"

He nodded. "He was the eldest of Lord Caradwyn of Fanglock, a shire one hundred leagues over the mountain. He had younger brothers, a sister and a father still living."

"Uncles, aunt and a grandfather. My father?"

"He was killed on another plane fighting the Druz. His name was Jethlyn. Lord Jethlyn Fangmoor."

"Am I the heir to anything?"

"Lord Fangmoor is still alive and rules. He has sent a thousand warriors. Look for them under the banner of the White Mountain. Now we must return you. You need to bathe, be fitted for your suit and learn some minor protocol."

I looked at him suspiciously. This was starting to sound like some kind of ceremony and I wasn't sure if I wanted that. Not that I had much choice. "How much power do I have?" I asked suddenly and he shrugged.

"Why?"

I went back outside, opened my hand and stared at the Ridge all 3 miles long of it. Spoke the words so that the coin glowed forth in bright flares reaching across miles to the ridge and bathed it in greenish gold. I could feel the life energy of the rock and the trees, the awesome weight of the mountain. Sweat dripped from my forehead, trickled down my sides and ran into the crack of my ass. It tickled.

The air stilled. One hundred thousand warriors stopped dead in their tracks and held their breath. I heard no horses whinny, nor dragons snort. The Colonel, Captain and everyone in the tent came out to stand near me, eyes wide and wondering.

I reached into the soil and tore the mountains loose, remade the ridge into a narrow pass that only four men mounted could cross at one time. I made sheer cliffs on one side, and impassable glacier with crevasses on the other. Swamps that would suck an entire battalion into a watery grave. I tried to seal the gate, but that was beyond my use of power and strength. The glow from the coin simply stopped and became a golden coin in my hand. The air filled with common noises once more and the muted roar of thousands of voices. I felt the reverberations of what had I had done back down the strings to the Druz and shuddered at the backwash of both hate and evil. It was a promise of retribution that I couldn't shut off. "The Gate is not sealed," I said wearily. "But it is confined. Bottlenecked. The Druz cannot breach this world in force. Not without destroying themselves in the attempt."

"My Lord," the colonel led me back inside and fussed over me until I waved him away.

"Can you give me something to drink?" He brought me a goblet and this was clearly of alcoholic origin. It hit my stomach with a warm rush and made me liquid in the knees. By the time I finished it, I didn't care if the world ended. I didn't remember the ride back.

## Chapter 22

She was drop-dead grade A gorgeous with long hair of iron gray that gleamed silver and hung to her waist. Her eyes were pools of emerald water that shimmered like the ocean at midnight with lashes as thick and sultry as a fawn's. Murphy pushed my mouth shut and grinned.

"You made him speechless, Zip," he said. "Not that he was a chatterbox before. She cleans up pretty good, huh? Unlike me."

I tore my eyes away from the willowy goddess in green silk and spared him a quick study. His hair was cut neatly on his neck, shaved and dressed in a fitted suit of tunic, pants and leather boots that laced up. He wore dark blue with silver accents, a belt hung from his waist with a sword and one of those tube weapons.

"A sword, Murphy?"

"I find myself with an inexplicable urge to wield one," he admitted. "I used to fool with fencing in high school. They say I'm not half bad, it might just save my life."

"How are you feeling, Jade?" She asked me and I recognized the voice.

"Okay," I checked myself. I was on a couch in the room I'd woke up in before and someone had pulled off my clothes, thrown a thin coverlet over me. I wasn't completely naked, but close. I hugged the covers to my chest and prayed nothing bulged where it shouldn't. People were coming and going, bringing clothing and a huge tub made of copper looking metal. Two of them filled it with water that came from a spigot on one wall.

Zip gestured. "We let you sleep as long as we could, Lord Jadewyn, but it is time to bathe, dress and make ready for the Ceremony."

"What Ceremony?" I wasn't getting up and walking in front of her in my skivvies. Murph pulled on the covers and I fought him. "Murph," I growled, reddening, and he stopped.

"Jade, who do you think took care of you when you were sick, pottied, and washed you? Held you when you puked? It wasn't me."

Oh great. Now I had more images to embarrass me.

"That's okay, Murphy," she said softly wrapping the covers around me and helping me out. "One of these men are gentlemen of the Bath and will help you, Lord Jadewyn." She pulled me over to the tub and I smelled the scents of spice and forests. The water was hot and frothed as my fingers trailed through it.

"Uh, you're not gonna watch, are you?"

"No." She gestured, they pulled a sort of screen around the tub, and one of them took me from her grip. She planted a kiss on my cheek and I was glad I was not facing her. My dick woke up with pointed enthusiasm. I leaped into the tub, clothes, sheet and all; buried my head under the water. Came up seconds later with a shout at the scalding temperature of the water.

"Holy shit! That's hot!"

Now, they were all laughing at me. Zip still stood there, soaking wet and her gown clung to every loving curve and made me harden even more. I groaned and bit my lip.

"Sorry. God, I'm such a dick," I mumbled, and Murphy pushed my head under so that bubbles from my words flew up my nose.

He pulled me up, choking and sputtering seconds later and said in my ear, "she's gone, Jade. You're safe. Stupid but safe." He patted me on the cheek and left me to the tender ministrations of the Bath staff scrubbed me as if to remove my skin. They rubbed lotions on me, did my hair and my nails, and treated me to a bruising massage even down to the soles of my feet. They left me weak, boneless, a bottom feeding fish.

It took three of them an hour to dress me, creating the garment on me. It fit like a second skin yet was loose enough to fight in; some kind of black stuff like leather but thinner, slippery to touch with a dull shine. It was a uniform of sorts and over the left breast was a spray of stars and comet tails in silver. The collar was high and pointed, edged in silver, as were the cuffs of the long square sleeves. The closure down the front was like Velcro, no buttons or zippers. The pants were snug in the crotch and when I pulled at it, I realized it had almost a built in cup. When I smacked it, I couldn't feel it on my balls. That would be handy in case of a kick in the nuts. I didn't like the way it crawled between the cracks of my ass and turned suspiciously to the tailor/dresser working on me. "This thing have underwear underneath? I'm not wearing no thong, right?" I dug around under the waistband and found the ties of a silky pair of pants. I readjusted everything inside with relief. Last on were silky socks and leather boots. They came halfway up my calves like riding boots, complete with spurs of silver. The boots stopped before they rubbed on the bite from the Druz. I poked it, found only a residual tenderness.

"It will only be a scar," Murphy told me. "You look very fine, very... Princely."

I would have punched him if I hadn't felt so limp. The valet placed some kind of jewelry around my neck. A thick chain from which dangled the coin that was a replica of mine and a sword's hilt covered with jewels and gold wiring around the scabbard. I pulled out the pommel of the sword and saw a short blade wrought of gleaming steel engraved with words not in English, but rather like old Celtic. I understood it.

'I serve Justice on the first blow and spill no Innocent Blood lest I be Tarnished and Weakened.'

The end of the pommel was a silver animal's head, like the face of a lion with chips of ruby colored stones for eyes. The guard was brass colored but harder and silver wire curled the edges of the cup. It was a pretty blade and well balanced for all that it was a deadly weapon. I had no idea how to use it. I shoved it back into its sheath. "I'll probably cut off something important of my own," I muttered. "I'm good with a hockey stick, not a pig sticker." I looked up. "Now what? I'm clean, duded up and ready for this... par-tee."

"They'll come get us when they're ready. Relax. You don't have to do anything but walk down the aisle and accept the command from King and Emperor."

"Command?" I shrieked. "Command of what?"

"You are their war leader, Jade. You've already put a major crimp in the Druz's advance by Terra-forming the Fangmoor Ridge." He paused. "Are you going to put it back when you're done?"

"How the hell do I know? I don't really know how I did in the first place."

Oriel and Belywyn bowed their way into my room. They were dressed in robes so ornate; I wondered how they managed to bend their heads and arms. They walked as if in a carton of cardboard.

"My Lord Jadewyn, are you ready?"

"Ready as I'll ever be. Let's get this over." I followed them out and was escorted by an honor guard, my bodyguard and courtiers. At the head of the procession was a man carrying a flag with the standard of Fangmoor, a blue and black square with a white stylized mountain peak.

We marched down towards the end of the hallway where a raised platform stood and seated in a horseshoe shape were nobles dressed with as much bling as any Royal British ceremonial. I even saw capes with fur on them. I spotted Zip and she gave me a quick smile. I saw Revenal Juris and the Elders from the Celene Foundation. Everyone else was beside or behind me.

I faced the man with a short-cropped steel-gray hair and emerald hard eyes. He wore a slight goatee, one of the few I'd seen with facial hair. He had a crown on his brows shaped like a twisted wire and in each link was a green stone. My stone was abruptly in my palm and glowing, resonating with the stones in his. I dropped to one knee, this man deserved respect and obeisance without question. I knew without anyone telling me, he was my cousin.

"My Lord," I whispered my hand going to my left shoulder. He pressed his own into me.

"Jadewyn of Fanglock and... Earth," his voice was deep and throaty. He pulled me up onto my feet. "I meet you at last, cousin. I have met your warrior friend, Murphy. A fine fighter, excellent expert shooter, a loyal friend. I am Fetherwyn."

"Yes. He is that." My voice was dry.

"Let me introduce you to your family." I met more cousins, uncles, aunt and a grandfather. He looked like me in a weird way and when he saw me, his face blanched and he whispered my father's name.

"Yes," Lord/King Fetherwyn smiled. "He does bear a strong resemblance to Jethelyn. He was my favorite nephew. So, tell me of your life on this plane called... Earth."

I spent the next six hours meeting family and telling them of my life as a teenager. High school and SWAT fascinated them. It wasn't until I'd been passed around to the entire general staff that I realize my mind was being picked for military experience, and I quickly learned to bypass them all to Murphy, who owned a prodigious amount of historical battle plans.

"You know, Murphy, you ought to be the Tactical Adviser," I said and no sooner than the words were out, he was pulled away and made so. Towards the moonrise – there were three, I finally found a quiet corner and was hiding in it when Zip tracked me down and sat next to me. We spent another couple of hours talking about stuff and each other, giggling like teenagers. I went to bed dreaming of a princess.

### *Chapter 23*

Murphy, Capt. K, Revenal Juris and I stepped through a heavily guarded gate emerging in the lobby office of the Celene Foundation Towers. Murph had wanted to touch bases with his wife, his commander and maybe recruit a few more team members. Revenal had to take back command of the forces stationed on earth plane and assess the situation there before imminent attack by the Druz.

I knew they would launch an offensive soon and simultaneously on Earth and Celene. Something about how the gate opened on both planes made Earth vulnerable to invasion. I felt the strings vibrate discordantly and it made my teeth ache. The captain studied my face; he had learned to read my moods and emotions quicker than I could have believed, as if he were empathic.

"What is it, Lord Jadewyn?"

We were seated in a small office in front of a computer monitor at a wooden desk. Four men in business suits, but clearly a military persuasion stood around deferring to Revenal and another general.

"The Druz are tweaking my spider sense," I said and he looked puzzled. Juris laughed grimly.

"He means he senses activity on the strings. Correct, Jadewyn?"

I nodded reached out and delicately fingered not one string, but a veritable rope of them. "Holy cow," I whispered. "There's too many. I can't separate them or hold them. It's intertwined. One dark chord holds them all."

"How many?" Juris demanded.

I looked at him in despair. "Millions. The Druz have found allies. Both here and on other planes."

"How will they travel?" He continued.

I opened my hand, looked at my palms. "Through my blood," I said slowly. "Their commander will open a new Gate and draw the armies through."

"How?"

"My blood calls the strings of those that travel the Gates freely, binds them together and lets them walk anywhere."

"Can you find this Gate?"

"Once he opens it, I am bound to it," I answered. "Once he opens it, I will be pulled there; he'll kill me and bind the gate open for all time. Hordes, millions of them will pour through and you won't be able to stop them."

"Then, we must prevent them from taking you," Revenal stated. "Can you find this Gate before they open it?"

"I think so." I knew it was a tangled twisted cord that had an evil slippery feel to it. When my hand reached it, the vibrations on it sounded and felt like no other. I grasped it not but like an electric fence line, touched it with the back of my hand so that I would not involuntarily close my fingers around it. The monitor beeped and scrolling across it were messages from the field, warning of a massing of men and machines.

"It's beginning," Revenal said reading it. "Troops are piling up on the Lockerlie Plain, on Celene. And here where you call Afghanistan. The Druz can masquerade as Afghan he rebels."

"How much damage can they do here?" I asked.

"They will destroy whatever is in their way and bring it through to Celene. Jadewyn, we need you there to wield the Seillach coin."

"I'm on my way." I stood and opened my hand, called forth the energy and the Gate widened to take whoever was willing to go. We stepped out on the battlefield inside the Battalion HQ and the military leaders went into a huddle discussing strategy. Murphy was in the thick of it. I heard him making decisions and stood up to allow others into the space I'd vacated. My bodyguard was right behind me as I unobtrusively worked my way out of the crowd of military men without causing a ripple. He stayed at my elbows as I searched for and found the stables.

"My Lord?" He questioned as I pulled out a dark bay gelding and saddled him myself. "What do you plan?"

"I'm going to sneak a peek at the enemy." I answered and he hurried to join me. I would have ordered him to stay, but I sincerely doubted he'd obey that command.

Several eyes watched us depart, and no one said anything yet I knew a message would already be on the way to someone's ear.

"Where do you want to go?" Kiannyn asked and I pointed to a small knoll that was above the plane and should give us an unobstructed view. We cantered out and behind me I heard the shouts of urgent voices warning us not to go. I pushed the horse harder and his feet pounded the ground like thunder.

The captain grinned and said, "Follow me. I know a shorter route." So I let him lead the way and we ducked into a ravine, from which great trees lined the banks and formed a sort of lane through which we were able to approach the front lines. Gradually, it angled up and we entered the woods proper. To watch him maneuver his horse through the trees at a near gallop was a ballet of twisting limbs and graceful seat that made me jealous. I wasn't quick enough to duck the smaller branches from smacking me in the face. Eventually, we reached the top, and

came out on a rocky knob that had a cliff, allowing a grand 180° view of the plains below us. My heart sank into my throat as we stared at the massive, seething black coated army. I saw infantry, cavalry and war machines for as far as the eyes could see. Off to the rear, I saw an encampment with tents and wagons.

Kiannyn pointed. "That's where the head of their forces resides."

"What's his name?"

"Coelanth. Commander of the Druz force. Grand General Coelanth." He shuddered. "He likes to pull prisoners' limbs off while they're still alive. If they take you, kill yourself."

I looked at him. "I doubt I'll have the opportunity. They have other uses for me."

"What are you going to do, Lord, Jadewyn?"

"Well, I had in mind a sneak survey down there and try to take him out personally," I admitted. "I thought, if I get rid of their general, I'd stop the whole war."

He stared at me as if what I said was so bizarre that it was unfathomable. Finally, he spoke, "their king would just appoint another."

"The Druz have a king?"

"Warlord, actually. His name is Olned. He has been warlord for 20 years."

"That's long?"

"Most Druz warlords don't survive internal conflicts longer than a few years. For him to hold his tribes together that long and attack Celene is a miracle."

"So, destroy him and his generals and the whole mess falls apart?" I mused. He shrugged.

"You're one... man, my Lord. Though you be the holder of the Seillach Pangorum and the String Bearer, you're only one being."

"You ever hear about the horse and the nail?" I asked and kicked my horse down the trail.

## **Chapter 24**

Kiannyn and I were laying on our stomachs so close to the front line that I could see the button closures on the Druz officers' uniforms. You could smell them, a little like rat feces and brimstone; it clawed at the back of your throat and made you gag.

Kin touched me, swallowed convulsively as if the smell was too much for him. "I've never been this close to them," he whispered. We watched as several outriders galloped in on beasts that looked like prehistoric sloth bears with the temperament of mother-in-law's. I heard the long, mournful call of a horn and the entire camp bolted to attention, the flaps on the black tent of the general staff flew open and several Druz officers marched out to receive messages. They barked orders that carried even to our ears. Kin translated in a whisper, "he's sending out a patrol, he knows spies are about. Probably best if we sneak back, my Lord."

I shook my head. "You go, Kiannyn. That's an order."

He looked at me aghast. "I would rather die than lose my honor, my Lord."

"I don't want your death on my conscience."

"What are you planning?" His face bore an expression of severe distress. I gripped the Seillach coin and used it to send him back behind our lines, where he was safe. The energy was enough to send a beacon to the Druz and within minutes, I was surrounded by armed warriors and had both arrows and swords pricking me to the point of bloodletting. I did not move. "My name is Jadewyn," I said carefully. "Your General Coelanth will want to speak to me."

My blood sparked in the air as it dripped from me. It floated like ruby fireflies, and did not hit the ground. Harsh voices screamed orders and they ringed me and stepped back as two more grabbed my arms and led me forwards towards the massive black tent and the equally

formidable giant with a face straight out of King Kong. He was as ugly as the butt end of a rhino and stuck it in my face.

"Who are you?"

I understood his mangling of the language of Celene and answered him. "I am he whom you seek, the Holder of Strings, the Gatekeeper." I stared him in the eyes and saw that his face dropped in astonishment. His reaction was to grab me by the throat and hoist me into the air to dangle. I choked and flailed at him, opened my mouth to curse him and his fist came at me faster than I could get the words out. He hit me in the mouth, it filled with blood, and I felt teeth loosen, my lips were cut and I bit my tongue. He held me until the blackness crept into my eyes and I could not draw in another breath of air.

Heat woke me. Fire near my face, hot enough to singe the hairs on my arms. I opened my eyes on black walls and a fire pit blazing merrily away. Druz faces watched me with avid interest, licked their lips and showed their fangs.

I felt weak, raised a hand to my neck and searched for fang marks. The Druz took my hand and squeezed the wrist so two spots of blood oozed out near my elbow. "Your blood is rich and potent, String Master," he said and smiled. His teeth were tinged with crimson and his tongue was barbed.

"I am Coelanth, Commander of Olned's forces. Why have you come to your enemies? Are you so foolish, so suicidal you seek your death?"

"I came, General, to stop this war," I said painfully.

He sneered, laughed and bent my arm back until the bone snapped. I screamed in pain, vomited and fell into a darkness until he slapped me awake. My arm throbbed viciously and I tried to move away from him; his feet were on my ankles and I was terrified he would crush them next.

"You cannot stop this war," he mocked. "You cannot bring us Druz home. It is a world destroyed and even if you could, we would not go. We prefer to fight and kill rather than live a boring existence on our old home." He paused. "You are a dead youngling. Unless you give me the Seillach and the Tree."

"The Tree? What do you want with the Tree?"

He kicked me, my body went rolling across the floor and my broken arm flopped. They hadn't even bothered to restrain me. "That is not your concern. Tell me where it is or die." He pulled out a wicked blade curved like a crescent moon and slashed it across my chest. Instant heat, my clothes separated and blood flowed in that same defiance of gravity to hover above me, like fireflies. His tongue darted out and flicked at it, missing nary a drop. I was nauseous, cold. My head felt like it wasn't attached and everything throbbed in syncope with my arm.

"If you kill me," I slurred over my swelling mouth, "you will never find the Tree. Or the Seillach Pangorum."

"I can beat it out of you," he threatened, and I managed a laugh. "You'll kill me with much more of your questioning technique, Druz. The Seillach coin will disappear with my death, and you'll lose it forever. There is no other String Bearer alive." I knew that deep in my gut.

He growled in frustration. "What do you want?"

"I told you. An end to this war. To speak to your king and make a treaty, a cease-fire."

"I will bring this to him and seek his answer."

"Bring him here. I want to look into his eyes," I said and he pulled me to my feet. He opened his hand, before I could draw one breath; we were traveling through a dark corridor to emerge in a rough camp somewhere not on Celene but a mountainous region that was sere, dusty



and starkly barren. A walled compound guarded by both humans' soldiers in Druz led into an adobe palace that was outfitted like a Turkish harem.

I was dropped at the foot of the table where an even uglier man sat on a bench covered in furs. He was nearly 7 foot tall with dark hair and fierce blue eyes, wore a golden collar and heavy gold baubles in both ears. His nose was pierced; he wore a flowing caftan of blue silk, belted with a crimson stitched sash that had little silver bells as tassels. They tinkled sweetly as he moved.

"Coelanth," he greeted and his voice was a deep growl. His eyes devoured me and his nostrils flared, as he smelled my blood. Reaching out a long arm, his fingers wiped the blood on my face.

"I smell... Seillach blood."

"Yes, sire. Ahh, the taste is finer than your own wines."

"Did you bring him here for me to drain? He looks almost empty."

"He is the String Bearer, sire. He came to me to demand an end to your war."

The king was silent and then swept his hand forward to knock me on the floor. I stared back up at him, opened my hand and spoke the words that brought the coin to full power. Time stopped.

## *Chapter 25*

Energies vibrated through me, filled me with a false sense of optimism. I managed to rise to my feet as bolts of blue fire bounced around the inside of the rude little manse. I struggled to control it, aimed it at the two of them and saw it bounce off what was obviously a shield of some kind.

Their faces wore snarls; they huddled behind whatever was protecting them and shrieked for guards. I risked a glance behind me and raised a barrier to spare me from a sword to the back. Coelanth retaliated with some kind of energy of his own and the place lit up like a payoff to a Vegas jackpot.

"You don't possess enough power to destroy us!" The king snarled and pushed Coelanth to the foreground. Fire scorched my back and tilted me forward. I turned my head over my shoulder and mages of their own kind were pointing staves at me from which bolts of fire flared; were able to breach my shield and set my clothes aflame. I doubled my efforts and saw the walls melt around us; the sky opened up to reveal great gray clouds that roiled in angry malevolence and threatened to hail on us. Their own clothes burst into smoke and arrows began to rain down around us, forming a circle outside the barrier of magical force so that the ground looked like a hedgehog. None of them penetrated the circle I was in or theirs.

I felt an escalation of the power within me, felt the ground under us begin to fall away. The very fabric of reality began to break up; I tried to hold it together as more forces battered me from the rear and the left. I reached inside myself and saw the strings, heard them stretching and breaking with an awful crescendo that I could not only hear but also feel on my skin. I grabbed the whole entire massive bundle of Druz with the coin in both hands, tore it loose from its anchors, and ripped it to shreds with a fury I did not know I possessed. My broken arm could not hold, and I dropped them where they whipped around like a fire hose and wrapped about me, tearing me off my fragile perch on the only stable piece of firmament. I fell a long way; the only reality to my existence was the coin in my fist and the torn strands of the Druz lines. They dragged me down yet I was afraid to let go of it, afraid it would cut me into ribbons or strangle me. I saw no sign of king or general, only knew I held their lifelines in my hand.

The Seillach coin flared, burned in my fingers, but I did not let go. It tugged subtly in my grip and began to pull me in a direction not down but sideways until my feet hit solid ground. I closed my eyes and ears, when I opened them, I saw pavement beneath me. I was standing on a street corner under a light post with the noise of bombs falling around me.

"Holy crap!" I said and ducked, knocking an iron bench into my broken arm. I looked up, saw both the general and his king were only yards away, and possessed of more mundane weapons like AK-47s, automatic rifles and handguns I'd only seen in SWAT sniper control.

I opened my hand, the Seillach coin was still there, still humming along like a cherry bomb. Strands of their lifelines were wrapped around various parts of my body, limp, torn and inert. I stood up, cradled my broken arm and glared at them while bullets and mortars went by over my head and exploded near my feet.

Clutching the coin in my hand, I reached into the heart of the Tree and tore loose a great big wad of its energy. Channeled that through the coin and cached it with all the hate, anger, despair, pain and desperation I'd ever held inside me since I'd sat in my mother's blood. I yelled, "Why don't all you Druz go to Hell!"

They disappeared. Without a whisper of a moan or even a word. I looked around. The rest of wherever this was hadn't stopped, mortars, bombs and bullets were still flying the not so friendly skies. I squatted and ran for the nearest building, changed my mind and hugged the sides of the street where abandoned and destroyed cars lined the curbs. The storefronts for the names of the businesses in Arabic and Farsi. I automatically translated to read, Tobacco, Bakery, Greengrocer, Cobbler. I was stuck in the middle of what was either the Afghanistan or Iraq war zone. I turned the corner ran smack into a man's chest, we both grunted and mine became a muffled cry of agony as it hit my broken arm. I fell, said 'shit' faintly and passed out.

## Chapter 26

I was hanging over somebody's shoulder as he dogtrotted. My hand bumped against his ass, which was oddly shaped until I recognized it as canteens and ordinance. He wore desert camouflage and smelled of Brut aftershave. I grunted, he spoke, old South with a definite twang. "What's your name, kid?"

"Jadewyn James," I managed and he stopped, hauled me around and set me down. A crowd of other grunts surrounded me, all young and armed to the teeth.

"Holy Christ," he breathed. "You're AMERICAN? Northern New England?"

"Boston, actually." I looked at my arm; it was in an inflatable cast and didn't hurt too bad.

"Field dressing. I gave you morphine. How the hell did you wind up here?"

"Long story. Where is 'here'?"

"Downtown Khedive. We're taking you to our base HQ."

"Good. I could use the rest." I closed my eyes and didn't open them until he dropped me on a cot under a tent.

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"Wake up, Yankee boy," I opened one eye on an older man's face, he wore major's pips on his shoulder and I wasn't too happy to see MPs standing behind him. "Your name is Jadewyn James?" I nodded slowly. "You're wanted by the FBI, and a few other agencies. They almost shit a brick when we made inquiries over you. How did you get over here anyway? You didn't come through customs or any airport, you sure as shit didn't hitch a ride on a military transport or cargo ship."

"I fell out of a plane," I answered, which while technically true, was probably not believable either way. "What are you going to do with me?" I looked from one to the other and didn't care for the glances they shared.

"You'll be put on a military hospital plane and sent to Germany, where they'll treat you. You're not in very good health, the doc says your W BC's are shot to hell, you're anemic, your arm's broken, and you're suffering from burns and some kind of radiation exposure. Where the hell have you been?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you," I sighed. "Can I get something to eat? I'm hungrier than a bear with a sore tooth."

"We'll bring you something. You don't get car sick or airsick do you? Flight out of here is in..." He looked at his wristwatch. "0600. Twenty minutes."

"Is it day or nighttime?"

He gave me a funny look. "Evening. You've been asleep for 12 hours."

"If you had a day like I just did, you'd have slept through it, too," I grumbled. "I hope you bring me something besides MREs. I've had enough of those."

"Oh, yeah? Where?" The major returned. I pulled the sheets and blanket up to my chin.

"My dad was a SWAT sniper." I was silent, remembering his last moments, and wondering where and how Murphy and the dudes were.

"In Boston?"

"Yeah. Out of the 4-7. Can you phone them, tell them I'm okay?"

He hesitated. "You're dead, James. They buried you next to your dad. They assume Sgt. Murphy is too."

I was silent, remembering. "I'm in a lot of trouble," I whispered. I needed my bodyguard and my honor squad, but was distracted by the tray brought in by a Corpsman in mufti. I smelled hot food and sank my teeth into lasagna, garlic cheese toast and salad, followed by Ice-Tea and cannelloni.

"You eat like a Marine," he commented and no sooner had I scraped the plate when two more MPs came in with a stretcher and handcuffs.

I protested and they only locked my good hand to the rails of the gurney as the cast interfered with the other. The infirmary was a Quonset hut set up on concrete blocks near the runway. Brilliant lights marked the strip and illuminated a huge C47 cargo/hospital plane. The bustling of armed personnel loading and unloading was loud. Humvees darted underneath like ticks on a dog. They transported me inside the plane set up as an ED, doctors and nurses took over, but the MPs remained with me. They were taking x-rays of my arm as we took off. One of the doctors stuck me with a needle and my recollections became muted and far away.

"He's out," I heard one say. "We can remove the brace, reduce the fracture. There are some bone fragments that need to come out; both the ulna and radius are separated. He may need some plates to hold everything together. Looks like someone twisted the arm until it snapped. His levels are below normal range, his UA and CBCs suck. Where has this kid been and why is he here? He's too young to be enlisted and he's not a dependent. And what's with the MP escort?"

"He's going to Ramstein for pickup; the NSA and FBI are waiting on ground for them. That's all we were told. Cast his arm, give him what necessary medical aid to keep them stable and deliver him." Their voices faded.

## Chapter 27

The first face my eyes opened on was not one I expected to see. In fact, I thought him long dead and buried as worm food.

"Jadewyn," the Colonel of Indian blood greeted me. I opened my mouth and grimaced, my throat was as dried up as last year's apple doll.

"You're dead," I said stupidly.

He grinned, those creepy perfect white teeth at me. "As dead as you are, Mr. James."

"I thought the Dursvan cut off your head."

"No. He did manage to slice other parts of me. Luckily, local EMTs arrived and helped save me. I've been looking for you since, James."

"What are you going to do with me?" I was afraid, and he knew it. His grin was not pleasant.

"Col. Brightarm," a doctor said and he turned.

"Jadewyn James," he acknowledged. "I've been searching for him, since Boston." Before I could protect myself, he had my mouth jammed shut with a rubber gag device, my hands and elbows pinioned with flex ties and strapped to a gurney. He leaned close into my face and I saw an unearthly blue flame in the back of his dark eyes. Mine widened. Although human and mortal, he had the flavor and essence of the Druz and the Druz leader, in particular.

"There are more of us than you bargained for, String Bearer," he whispered. "I have plans for you. Plans that will make what the Druz general had in mind look like child's play. Did you ever wonder what it would be like to be alive with no arms, legs, ears, eyes, nose, half your guts and without a dick to pee through? There are many parts I can rip off and still leave you living. If you want to call it living. I have a very talented vivisectionist that is dying to get his hands on you, James."

He nodded to the doctor and they pulled my sheet down, exposed my ass, stuck me with a big bore needle and it brought tears to my eyes. As the icy burn traveled up my back, it took away my breath, my hearing and my consciousness. Without my voice, I was helpless.

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A bright spear of light twisted deep in my eye. I wanted to cry out and couldn't. My throat constricted, and my muscles cramped, but I couldn't even voice a groan. My body felt paralyzed except for my eyes and that produced only the after image of a red spot. Voices murmured around me, the rustling of papers, the scent of alcohol and formaldehyde.

I swallowed. Something was in my throat, a tube of some kind that triggered my gag reflex, but I couldn't throw up or pull it out. Tears ran down my cheek and now, I felt cool air on my skin, and goose bumps raised. I was totally naked.

"He's awake, Colonel," the voice was southern with a drawl like West Texas. Faces loomed over me; their hands gripped my chin and lifted my face to an uncomfortable stretch.

"Well, hello, my beauty," the Boston Seneca Indian said nearly to my eyelids. I tried to struggle but the most I could manage was to slowly curl my fingers and toes. I was absurdly grateful I could feel them after the last conversation with him. "No, you can't speak. We know not to let you conjure your power talisman. At least, not until we learn how to take it away from you. Care to enlighten us? No? I didn't think so.

"So. You'll stay gagged and bound. We'll feed you with the tube through your nose. Worse comes to worse, we'll put in a stomach tube and keep your weight up that way. You pee

through a tube and when you need to eliminate, we have a bedpan for you unless you prefer diapers.

"The scientists want to explore your insides quite seriously. So I'm not exactly sure how long you'll be with us. Dead or alive, you're worth about the same." He stared into my eyes. "You understand me, James?" I nodded. "Are you expecting the US cavalry to come riding to the rescue? We are the cavalry."

I wished I could spit. I wished I could curse. All I could do was ooze salty tears of frustration down my cheeks.

"Your eyes flashed like diamonds, no emeralds. Full of light and hate. Where did you send the Druz? Can you bring them back?"

I managed to butt my head forward and whacked him on the chin. He cursed and dropped my face to land on the table with a thunk. I saw stars.

## Chapter 32

The affair went on until the morning sun came up and I was surprised at the beauty of another world's sunrise; knew that the earth did not have a monopoly on such beauty. The colors were all different and yet the same glorious array. What made it all the more enjoyable was Zip's head on my shoulder and her hand on my lap. I was trying to be good and having a tough time of it. She'd managed to get my attention after I'd stuffed my face and had dragged me to the roof of the palace through a convoluted maze of passages and staircases to emerge on a flat section that was laid out with blankets and cushions. No company around but our own.

"You ought to relax, Jadewyn. Rest. Enjoy the rise of Demos. With me," she smiled and helped me sit, careful of my broken arm and various bruises. I tried not to yawn, my aches and pains, full stomach, late night and meds were conspiring to make me comatose. Unexpectedly, she asked, "don't they kiss on your plane, Jadewyn?"

I sputtered. "Of course we do!"

"Well then, why haven't you tried?"

"Cuz I-." She leaned over and kissed my open mouth and I followed her lead. She tasted like chocolate, peach ice cream and red velvet cake all mixed together. She laughed and whispered in my ear.

"So, you're a shy one? I suppose I'll have to teach you our customs." And she did so. They were not so much different from our own and I think she was pleased with my performance. I never did get any sleep that morning.

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Late afternoon found me hard at work in the library, a massive room with its ceiling so high that it actually sported clouds of mist somewhere over my head and was the size of a softball field. I had pestered the resident librarian for any books on the Gates and the Mythology of the Tree as well as the coin.

The books she gave me were thin pamphlets made of carved wooden plates bound together with gold and silver wire. The figures on the pages made no sense to my eyes yet when I ran my fingers on the raised symbols, I understood every word. It had been written several thousand years earlier by a monk named Sagarius and told of a wise Deity that had planted a sacred Tree in a garden marking the central hub of the universe and guarded the lifelines of all creation. He had created a magical device that could focus the power of both and taught several of his chosen to wield it.

He then sent them out to various ends of those Strings and they used the power to make Planes and populate them with beings of their own desires. Some of them went mad with the

power and became despotic gods, others created Paradise and Hell. From each plane, more spawned off until there were a multitude, more than any one being could count. Each one different in a subtle way until the differences became massive.

Access to these planes came only through the Gates. Some remained open; their gods of gatekeepers closed others because the inside was too awful to allow the inhabitants to exit. From these planes came our legends of Hell, Limbo and Purgatory filtering through to Earth. Celene was one of the first planes to come into existence and the closest to the Tree of Life.

“Does this mean Earth is the one true Plane?” I muttered. I found reference to this Deity who had created order out of Chaos—he was called Eloahim, Eloahymn, and Lord of Chaos. Another tome described him and to my astonishment, I saw a drawing of what clearly resembled a Druz, seven foot tall and ugly as sin with those piercing laser blue eyes. I was shocked that it was implying Celene’s origins were from our enemy.

What I was looking for and hoping to find as a way to get back to Earth without using my blood to open a gate or attracting the attention of the Druz, the NSA or the Dursvan officers. Zip tracked me down, buried behind a pile of dusty old manuscripts and had been watching me for long moments before she spoke and scared me out of a difficult translation. I jumped as her fingers poked me in the ribs.

“Jesus jumping-!” I shouted and she smiled.

“I found you.”

“I wasn’t lost,” I protested and she handed me a box that I knew as their version of a lunch tote. I dug into it, realized I was starving as I found meat, fruit, and a drink like tea. I stuffed my face as fast as I could cram it in. “Thanks. I’m starving,” I mumbled through a mouthful.

“How long have you been here?”

I shrugged. “Dunno.”

“Did the Finder log you into the system?”

“Finder? Oh, you mean the librarian?”

“The woman who finds these Epicaries.”

“I suppose she did.” She touched the table and a flat screen appeared on the surface with their version of language. Her eyes widened.

“Jade, you’ve been at this for over seven hours!”

“No wonder I’m hungry. And my ass hurts.” I grabbed a fruit and stood up, stretching. Rubbed my butt cheeks and I swore my bones creaked.

“You look terrible. You’re turning shades of green and yellow,” she told me frankly. “Have you gotten any rest?”

“I’ve been resting for days. Hours.” I spread my hands, indicating the pile of books in front of me.

“That’s not resting.” She bent her head to the screen, pushed two corners and spoke into it. Minutes later, I was being gently but firmly escorted out to a waiting carriage with my irate bodyguards doing the pushing. Medical personnel were standing at the doors and before I could protest, Zip had the doc stick a square patch onto my bare forearm; I felt an instant heat and just as suddenly as a sneeze, I was gone.

## Chapter 28

I heard myself groan and turned over. My skin stuck to something and I bolted upright when I realized I was untied, but then my head hit metal and my exploring hands and feet felt the confines of a box. I was inside a box with a grated door just big enough in which to squat. I

could speak too, but my words made no sense and I couldn't call the coin forth. My chest hurt. My fingers found the 4 x 4 pad on the right side of my breast up near the shoulder and under it a raised chunk of something hard. There were stitches. It felt suspiciously like a pacemaker.

I banged on the grate and kicked my feet. The only thing I noticed was that the cage merely shivered. I was hot, sweaty and naked. No toilet arrangements in this box and no more catheters stuck in my dick. I had no idea where I was or how long it'd been since I'd seen the Colonel. I wished him to hell, tried to speak the words to call the Seillach and a burning sensation started in my chest under the breastbone, traveled down my arm and made me nauseous. The moment I stopped trying to speak, the pain went away. I thought I was having a heart attack.

I reached instead for a string, and when nothing happened, gently tugged the silken cord until I felt a response. Capt. Kiannyn knew it was a summons and I hoped he could find his way to me. He was my one hope of rescue. I tried to touch others, but could not grasp them firmly. I'd felt the strings tingle, knew my cousin and friends were searching and hoped they'd reach my side.

Someone rattled my cage. The Colonel's face peered in and unlatched the door to haul me out where I fell to the floor of the lab and was not surprised to see other cages with animals confined within. There were science geeks standing around observing me.

"What did you get?" Brightarm asked.

"Brain waves peaked. Some kind of high-end Alpha and electrical energy like nothing I've ever seen before," one answered. It was a woman's voice. "Can you make the subject do it again?"

"Oh, I doubt that," the Colonel grinned, wolfishly "It's paired with a pain response, the beginning of a heart attack. We don't want him turning this lab into a bomb crater now, do we? The device is how we control him."

"Does he speak? Understand English?"

"Of course. We have his vocal cords paralyzed, so he can't speak. If he speaks, he can access the power and we'll lose him. Not to mention, he'll kill us."

She looked startled, but then offered me a hand up. I covered up my privates and blushed a deep red that I felt all the way to my toes. She tugged at a lab coat hanging on a nail and covered me with it while the Colonel watched with amused eyes. "He's not going to be here long enough to get attached to, Dr. Joyce. I wouldn't worry about his feelings or sensitivities," he sneered. She gave him a look and turned to me as she pivoted me into a wheelchair. With restraints.

"What's your name?"

I tried to answer, and all that came out was a garbled grunt; the tube down my nose irritated the back of my throat and made me want to gag.

"I told you. His voice is paralyzed. His name is James, Jadewyn James."

"I don't need you for my tests, Colonel," she snapped. "You can leave the lab and the test subjects to me."

"Sorry, doctor. He's not to be left unsupervised or without guards."

"I'm a black belt, Colonel; I think I can handle a skinny fifteen-year-old boy."

"He shrugged. "Jade, there are armed men outside these doors, and the lab is equipped with gas should we have to knock you out. You're twenty stories underground. If you even make it outside this lab. They have orders to shoot to kill. Understand?"

I called him a fuck head and although the words didn't leave my mouth, he understood. He left me with her and the other lab geeks. The experience wasn't much better than others were; I had blood tests, skin tests, electricity run through me and stuff just this side of torture. I'm sure most of it wasn't legal. By the time they were done with me, I was nearly shell-shocked, my broken arm was hurting and I had a hard time keeping tears of pain and self-pity from messing up my face.

I'd have thought the lady doctor had felt some compassion for me but it turned out she just had a hard on for the Colonel, and was using me to piss him off. They got through with me and put me back in the box only now it let me stretch out and sleep. I curled up around my hurts, tucked my cast arm into my stomach and rocked myself to sleep.

## *Chapter 29*

Breakfast came. Two plastic containers of a tan colored liquid that they pumped into my stomach with little regard for my taste, or comfort. I felt like a balloon pumped full of air and the tech tried to squeeze in the last couple, I felt an instant nausea and all of it came back up through my nose and out my mouth in a stream that spewed across the room. He yelped and leapt out of the way, cursing me bitterly. "You can just go without," he snarled and left me in the mess. I sat in the stuff while it congealed, and fermented; there was little I could do to change the situation. It wasn't until the Colonel and his cronies made an appearance that I was cleaned and cared for.

"What the hell happened?" He asked and no one answered. "He stinks. The least you can do is feed and keep him clean, can't you? Wash him off and put something on him. We're taking him to the blockhouse to see what happens when they trigger his...energy source. Wire him up."

Of course, they gave me a shot that made everything seem far away and hard to concentrate. I felt like I was flying and the strings around me were a tangled mess that I could not decipher not follow for more than a few feet; all along their length, they vibrated angrily, bouncing and snarling others, touching them until the entire mass was in chaos. Existence hovered on the brink of instant annihilation. I reached out a languid hand and stilled them; just enough to let them resonate like a hive on the edge of a swarm.

One snapped and flicked my face; I stared with one-half opened eye and knew the flavor of its owner. My bodyguard was searching for me. Grasping the slippery filament of light, energy and life force, I tugged gently; felt another join and another until I held an armful. I smiled. The Dursvan and the Celine authorities knew where I was. I let go, was abruptly on my back in a concrete box with video cameras arrayed around me, stark naked, cuffed and able to speak. The tube was still down my nose and with a cry of revulsion; I pulled it out, gagging as the thing came up coated with half-digested 2-cal and stomach acids. I threw it on the floor, got to my feet and held onto the wall as my head swam.

My ass hurt. They'd stuck me with several needles after dropping me in here. Wherever 'here' was.

7 foot high, painted cinder blocks, two small windows high up with a concrete step so you could look out. All I saw was the glistening of the sun off white sand as far as my eyes could see. It looked like the old atomic testing grounds at White Sands.

The rest of the room was bare, 12' x 16' of bare blank concrete blocks, no graffiti, no signs, and no evidence of a door out. I looked up and saw no trapdoors, just more concrete with reinforcing rebars showing in places. The floor was concrete and in the far corner, I found a steel hatch where a locking wheel had been on the inside and recently removed. When I stamped on it with bare feet, I heard only a muffled thud.



“Having fun?” Brightarm’s amused voice came out near my head. I saw no sign of any audio links, but they could be as small as a fly with fiber optics.

“Why don’t you come in here and join me, Colonel?” I asked and my voice sounded like gravel in a can.

“Side effects of the drugs and the tubes,” he told me. I rubbed my throat and then grabbed at my chest as that burning sensation started under my breastbone.

“That, James is your pacemaker being tweaked. Feels like an elephant has your guts in a vice, doesn’t it? Call your power.”

Oh, I planned to only not how he expected. I broke one of the cameras and found a sharp piece, used to it to cut myself, watched as the blood floated upwards and created a gate before the watchers could understand what I was doing and before he could escalate the in my chest. He triggered it. As I jumped through, the pain dropped me in my tracks. I fell, screaming as my heart seized. I hit the tile floor of the lobby in a massive skyscraper to the accompanying boom of a small explosion. People rushed past me, until they realized there was a body lying there.

Someone’s soft hand rolled me over and pulled my hands from my chest. I was white, covered in sweat and gritting my teeth so hard I couldn’t get the words out, but Zip saw the a lump on my breast, and felt its heat. Murphy was with her, the Captain, Revenal and all the others I had gathered by their strings. Someone put a pillow under my head and covered me.

“Jade, what have they done?” He asked, his hands busy at my wrist. “Get the EMTs here! Looks like a –”

“Heart,” I gasped, clawing at my chest. “Implant!”

“Pacemaker?”

“Yargh,” I grunted. “Hurry, Murph. I can’t hold it long. Is the gate closed?”

He looked. “You used your own blood to open one?” He found the cut on my wrist and the cast. “Jadewyn and, what else did they do you?” His voice was trembling.

“Murph, I’m dying,” I said and close my eyes.

### **Chapter 30**

Softness all around me. I was buried in a pile of down comforters mom had washed and hung on the line, stacked on my bed so I could burrow into them like a gopher down a hole. The sheets smelled of sunshine and fresh air, newly mown grass and cinnamon apples.

I licked my lips. They were so dry that my mouth stuck to my upper lip. I swallowed. My throat hurt as if I’d been screaming at the top of my lungs cheering on our team at the game. My chest hurt in a dull way, matching the throbs in my arm and wrist. I must have been dropped kicked in the goal zone or somebody whacked me with their stick.

“Mom? Can I have some Tylenol? Glass of Pepsi?” I called out in a whine and a hand helped me to sit up. Hairy. I tried to open my eyes; they were covered with a film so that all I could see were vague gray shapes. A woman stood near my bedside with several men. Several short men that made my heart race as if there stood deadly enemies.

“Dad?” My voice quivered in total fear and panic.

“Jade?” That was Murphy’s voice and that helped to calm me.

“Murph? Where’s Mom, Dad? What happened? Did I get smashed at the game?” Then, “I’m really thirsty. Can I have a drink? MOM?”

He picked up a cold cup with a straw and guided it to my mouth. I sucked icy water until it was all gone. “What do you remember last, Jade?”

I hesitated. “What? I have a concussion? It must have been some game. Did we win?”

“You didn’t hit your head as far as we know,” he answered carefully. “Tell me, what was the last tithing you remember doing?”

“Taking the bus home from soccer practice on Wednesday. The 13th. Dad was working the Ellis case. You know, you were helping on the phone tips.”

“Jade, that was six months ago.”

“Six months!” I dropped the cup, lucky that it was nearly empty. “I’ve lost six months!”

“Jade, do you remember Zyperia? Zip? Captain Kiannyn? The Elders and the Tree?”

I stared at him, my stomach dropping as the memories filtered back. “A tree? A big tree that grows in the lobby of a... hotel? I dreamt of a giant tree. It’s all running through my head. I remember it kept me from going insane when... those things---tortured me.”

“The doctors said you’d been tortured. Who, the Druz?”

I stared at the ceiling as I realized that both my parents were dead. Killed by the Colonel’s men and indirectly by the Druz. “No. The NSA Colonel. He’s part of the Druz now. He’s some kind of hybrid alliance between human and... them.” I was exhausted, could barely keep my eyes open and found myself mumbling incoherently as my attention wandered off. All I wanted to do was forget again. To sleep. They told me to go to sleep.

“Can’t,” I mumbled. “He can track me. Satellite bug. Come for me.”

“You’re safe here, Jade. You’re on Celene, not Earth,” Murph soothed and that made me even more paranoid. I tried to sit up but just couldn’t manage as waves of dark fuzziness pulled me under.

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Kisses woke me the second time. At first, I thought a fly had landed on my face and swatted at it, yiked as my broken hand protested along with the rest of my abused muscles. I heard a girl’s laugh and the rough tones of a man’s voice. I said hello in a strained reply and asked if it was Murphy.

“Wake up, sleepy head,” he was amused. “Your girlfriend tried to make you into Sleeping Beauty but I told her you were too ugly.”

“Not as ugly as your mug,” I snapped and sat up. I moved slowly, found my entire body was one giant bruise especially where the pacemaker had been inserted and removed. Exploring the site, I found fresh 4x4 patches and stitches underneath.

“Do you still remember what happened, Jade?” He asked.

“I do now. Vaguely. They hurt me, both Druz and the Colonel. He’s some kind of... liaison to the Druz, connected to their leader. He wants the Tree, the Coin and me.”

“Does he know how to reach you?” Zip asked holding my fingers. I rubbed hers, noting the softened texture of her skin. No hair. Must have been Murphy’s hairy hands to which I’d awakened.

“I think so. He knows what the Druz know. And he knows American technology.”

“We’re a little beyond that now, Jadewyn. With our new allies,” Murphy argued. “How can he access this?”

“He doesn’t have to. I’m drawn to Earth as soon as I invoke the coin and if he accesses the Druz knowledge, he knows he can call me back by my blood.”

“Can’t you cut his string or something?”

I shrugged, winced as it pulled on injured muscles. “I tried that with the Druz. I sent them to Hell, wherever that is and some of them wound up in Iraq on the battlefield aligned with human. Some of them merged like Brightarm, he’s more than human, with Druz memories and knowledge. Once he learns to separate and use them, I’m in deep shit.”

“Well, let’s take him out now,” Murphy suggested and the Captain agreed.  
“He’s NSA or something, Murphy. Good luck.”  
“You’re not going back, then. You can stay here.”  
“Murph, you have to go back. You have a wife, a family to fight for and a life,” I said.  
“You can’t go back unless I take you.”  
“Someone else can do it.”  
“No,” I shook my head. “No one else can, now. The Gates are all closed until I open them.” He was silent.

## Chapter 31

I was dressed in a tailored vaguely military uniform and being presented before what was the royal courts. My cousin, the Emperor/King of Celene smiled encouragingly at me. Revenal Juris, the Captain, Murphy Zyperia were all behind me and dressed for an occasion.

“What’s this for?” I hissed out of the corner of my mouth. It was Zip that answered.

“Fetherwyn is making you a Baron in your own right with properties in Sudania and Asterlath, a seat on his Council and with a position in the Royal Forces.”

“And all before my SATs,” I muttered. “Does this mean I don’t have to get a job this summer?”

Murphy smacked me on the back of the head and I ducked, said ‘Oww’. I still had my arm in a cast and under the fancy clothes; I sported an impressive array of black and blues rapidly turning greenish yellow like rotten chicken fat. Gross. Their docs said I’d heal without any major damage and I suspected that it was partly due to the runoff of energy from the Seillach’s power. I still hadn’t called it out; was afraid that the moment I did, the Colonel could drag me back to earth and finish me off. Worse, break me and use me to manipulate the strings to his whims. I tried to think of a way to sneak back without alerting either the guards or the colonel, yet hadn’t quite figured out the means to do so.

My cousin was pontificating and I paid attention with one ear; was riveted by the sight of their Generals in high-class uniforms of the Dursvan Hierarchy as they massed in the courtyard. This was turning out to be a very complicated and expansive affair, promised to be a lengthy and tedious coronation. I sighed, plastered a look of intense focus on my face and went inside my head only breaking free when Zip asked if I wanted to dance. Hours had gone past and I must have passed muster as no one was asking if I was catatonic. Nor did they look at me funny as if I’d been somewhere else. Which I had.

“Hello? Space boy? Are you here?” Zip’s amused tones interrupted my reverie.

“Duh?”

“Oh, that’s an intelligent response,” she pinched me and I yelped. Several people near us turned and I frowned so ferociously that they dropped their eyes and ignored me.

“What?”

“Where have you been for the last three hours?” she asked. “Certainly not with me, although you were great at faking it. You’re not in pain, are you? Some of the faces you’ve been making scared off several men who tried to cut in on my dancing.”

“No, sorry,” I swallowed. “I’m tired. Hungry. Are you hungry?”

“There’s a buffet table set up over by the Red Arch. Shall we?” She pointed and I made a beeline for it, towing her along with me. My obtrusive bodyguards followed. She loaded my plate and explained what each item was and what it might taste like. I told her not to tell me what creature it came from or that it tasted like chicken.

“Chicken?” Her brows furrowed and she widened her eyes. “What’s chicken?”

“Remind me to introduce you to the Colonel,” I said taking round balls that looked like watermelon and tasted like crab. Glancing over her head, I saw that the archway of red stone glistened as if formed of mica. It was very pretty and teased me with a kind of residual memory. I dropped my plate and stared, to the annoyance of everyone around me and the staff that hurried to clean up the mess. Zip was the first one to ask me what I had seen.

“What is it, Jadewyn?”

“That’s a Gate.” I pointed with a shaking finger.

“It’s the Red Arch,” she said patiently.

“No, it’s a gate. The Gate to Druz.”

Captain K was suddenly behind me. He squeezed my shoulder and spoke into my ear. “Are you sure?”

“Sure as a pig’s ass is pork.” I looked around the rest of the Great Hall and knew why it was called the Hall of Leave-taking. I found several more hidden gates. Pointed with rising alarm. “These are all gates---to Earth, Dursvana, Elysian, to Sythia, to Mafuthyn.” I named places I knew had been lost to the Celene memory for many lifetimes but beckoned me with a force almost beyond my resistance.

“Don’t say anything to anyone,” I spoke out of the corner of my mouth and received astonished stares from the Celene natives. “I don’t know if I can open them,” I explained “Or if it’s even safe to try.

“How do you think it will activate?” Murphy asked studying the Arch and the Colonnade. I pulled the two of them by the arms and headed into the crowds, away from the center floor and into a small alcove where no one could approach or overhear us.

“They resonate in my head, Murph,” I replied. “It’s as if they are a box tied with a string. Pull the loose ends and the whole thing unravels and opens.”

“What powers these gates?”

“The power of Chaos and Entropy,” I said. “The opposite of what powers the Tree and the Seillach coin. I’m not bound by it to the Colonel’s notice.” I frowned. “At least, I don’t think so. Damn, I’m still hungry.” I turned on my heel and went back out to the buffet with single-minded focus. I heard Murphy tell Zip that when food was my subject, all else took a back seat and paled in comparison.

### *Chapter 33*

“God dammit!” I came awake cursing, sat up and looked wildly around my room. I was tucked under a light coverlet and in pajamas, slathered with a thin film of salve that smelled like balsam. When I rubbed it off, my skin felt cool and the bruises were gone. I felt okay, not sore or stiff but I was definitely hungry and I had to piss. I was pissed, I was tired of being babied and put to bed like some idiot who didn’t know when to quit.

The moment my feet hit the marble floor, a tingle went through me and the doors opened letting in three courtiers and soldiers. They escorted me to the bathroom under my growling protestation and wouldn’t even let me slam the door in their faces. I finished, wiped my hands and body cleaning off the last of the goop and suffered through their dressing me. I did draw the line at wiping my own butt. The clothes they had picked out for me was a uniform like what they wore, black pant, tunic with high collar and a zipper up the side. It was stiff and had a belt off the right side from which dangled one of those power rods and a short blade or very long knife. No insignia or rank, not even silver buttons to spruce it up. My boots were soft leather, laced on the instep, calf, came up almost to my knees, and the bottom of my pants bloused into the tops. Underwear was a kind of padded long johns. I smoothed the chest down with one hand; the

material felt stiff on the outside but wore like soft silk.

Captain K said, "It's sythica, Jadewyn, and will turn a blade, projectile or acid."

"Like Kevlar."

"Kevlar?"

"Bullet proof vest material," I explained and he knew what I was talking about from Murphy's description of his weapons and gear. Murph had told me that they were busy at work replicating his automatic rifle and Glock 19. I wasn't sure if that was such a good thing.

"Where is Murphy?"

"Training class," Kiannyn returned. He cleared his throat. "Uh, my Lord, your doctors request you remain in your room and rest. For at least two more days."

"They do? If they think I'm going to sit here and watch the mold grow, they're crazy."

"It was more an order than a request," he grumbled. "And King Fetherwyn asked that you obey it."

All my American genes wanted to kick up a fuss over being *ordered* but my will squirmed in my stomach that I should listen to my *King*. I bitched some more but wound up throwing myself on the couch where I stared out the window. "What else can I do?"

"Do you play games of skill or gamble?"

"Like chess? Or do you have video games?" I perked up. I had to explain the concept but he knew what I meant and asked one of the other dudes to bring a collection of such devices to us. He showed me how they worked, and we spent the afternoon annihilating vast armies and aliens until my thumbs were sore. Some of the tactics he used were so outdated that I was surprised his army had won any engagements. Some of my own elicited frowns of disapproval and mutters of dishonor and sneakiness.

"War is hell," I quoted. "All's fair in war and video games. The Redcoats don't march into battle anymore and the guerillas hide behind trees. Can't shoot what you don't see."

His face wore a look of complete bafflement and I had to explain how Navy SEALs and Delta Team worked.

"Didn't Murphy tell you about SWAT?"

"Yes," he gasped. "But I thought he was joking."

"They never joke about SWAT," I commented. "It's a dead serious bunch of dudes when on a mission."

"Snipers."

"The best in the business. Well, except for SEAL Team 6. With them covering your back, you're safer than gold in Fort Knox."

A knock sounded on the door and two plain-jacketed dudes carted in a feast setting it on the table where we were gaming. Sandwiches, soup, sweet treats and bottles of ice-cold wine and sweet liquor that I had developed a particular taste for-it reminded me of Dr. Pepper and lemonade but with a kick. Not enough so you'd notice a buzz after a few. Their beers were good for that.

I didn't recognize the serving dude that brought in the food; he was dark-skinned with a pointed face and rather foxlike. Not from Celene, Dursvan or Druz. He opened a bottle and poured me a glass.

Captain K stared. "What is your name?" he asked and the person dropped his head so that the amber eyes were fixed on the floor. They weren't still, but flicked here and about as I caught him looking at me.

“Stellath, my Lord Captain.” Its voice was a thin wheeze and made the hair on the back of my neck twitch. His shirt was a dark blue tunic and his slacks with spirals of silver down the outside of the legs. Silver buttons faced with lions heads and a stylized lions mane on his back and chest. The uniform recognized as Household staff.

“What plane are you from?” Kiannyn demanded.

“Evenmon, My Lord Captain.”

“I am not your lord. How did you get here to Celene from Evenmon?”

“Through the Gate. Tarrin recruited many of us to serve in the Palace. Times are poor on Evenmon.” Now his eyes rose to mine and I did not like the curious flash of triumph in them as I raised the glass to my mouth. Without thinking, I threw it in his face, leaped backwards as he shrieked. Red rivulets raced down his cheek like blood. His hands clawed at his throat, he gagged and sank to the carpeting as he wheezed for air. His face turned a purplish hue, his eyes bulged and his heels drummed the floor. White foam covered his jaw and he bit his own lips. He gasped, shivered as blood poured from his mouth and then became a silent corpse at our feet. The other manservant remained frozen in horror at the point of Kiannyn’s sword as he stood between us. I hadn’t even seen him move.

“I am no part of his machinations, My Lord!” he shrieked and he was clearly of a different race.

“Don’t eat or touch anything, Jadewyn,” Kiannyn snarled and called for re-enforcements. In minutes, my suite filled with guardsman and doctors who removed the questionable food to check for poisons. Murphy and Zip were some of the first to arrive.

“Who wants me dead?” I whispered in shock at the rapid and ugliness of the poisoning.

“I don’t know, Jadewyn but I will find out,” Kiannyn and the Grand Commander promised. “In the meantime, you will have your own food taster.”

I shook my head. “No one need die for me. I can read the strings before I eat again and it will tell me if I can trust the food.”

“No,” he was adamant. “In this, *I* hold sway and you *will* obey me. Nor will you sleep alone. From here on, you will be protected 25/9.”

“24/7.”

He smiled grimly. “Not on Celene. 25/9.” I grumbled, bitched and complained but I was ignored. And bored. Bored. Bored. Bored.

## Chapter 34

If I thought I’d been fussed over and cosseted before, couldn’t even take a step backwards without falling over a guardsman or soldier. Big scary dudes that would make a Boston Bruin look twice. My private life was measured in stolen moments where I hid from prying eyes in the bathroom, closets and offices behind closed doors with a bodyguard outside it and only after they checked the room first. I was only left alone with the captain, Murphy or Zip in attendance and she carried with her a set of her own personnel. King’s niece and all that.

I had asked about the dead servant and told that he’d been sent by an outside hiring agency used by the Palace before to supply supplemental staff and had never been a problem. No one seemed to know who’d engaged the Evenmon or how he got through a closed Gate. His companion had been interrogated and didn’t know anything; had been a loyal staff member in the palace for years. Celene had a whole race of beings that did nothing but service their employers, they came from a plane called Cinis. All of them looked like a cross between the Geico motorcycle man and a gnome.

I pulled the dead man's string and was shocked to see its end dangle from my grip in one short strand with no way to read it forward or back. That had never happened before; I had never found a string I could not follow or find. I let it go and slid it out of sight as if it had never been, leaving a strange oiliness on my hands that prompted me to wipe them on my pants leg. I was suddenly glad I had not tasted the line in my mouth.

"Lord Jadewyn?" Selwyn, Zip's cousin and guard laid his gauntlet hand on my shoulder. "Are you with us?" He looked worried.

"Yeah," I nodded. "I was trying to read the dead-Stellath's cord."

"Oh." His face was a range of emotions, puzzlement, awe, envy. "What is it like?"

"Not so great. Imagine knowing how you were born and how you'll die and everything in between. Now, add a billion more to it, all clamoring to be picked up and read."

"Is it true that you can find anything that is lost?"

"Yeah. Why? Did you lose something?" I closed my eyes and sat down on the desk of whoever is office this was. Military maps covered every inch of the walls and portraits of men and horses. Another wall of what looked like mules but with fangs and split hooves. His or her chair was comfortable, too.

"A favorite ring given to me by my father before he died," he offered and I asked him to describe it. I looked. Came back to the present. Knew he hadn't told me it was more than a ring, it was the seal of his house and he could not claim kingship without it.

"There's a tree on your property, tall with red leaves and three forks in the trunk. It sits alone in a meadow under Thorn Hill. At its base is a rock wall. Two steps from the wall near the left root is a den...some kind of weaseling thing. Inside its lair is your ring. Along with a few other things it stole. Shiny, sparkly things. Be careful, there are snakes inside, too."

"A tisslewith. They love to collect things that glitter. Thank you, My Lord. It has been missing for many years." He watched me curiously, as he waved his hand in the air. "How do you feel? You spent more time with the Druz than any of our men and you came back whole and sane."

"Relatively sane. Not so your men?"

He shuddered. "Broken in mind and body. The Druz do not treat prisoners well. The Druz rarely take prisoners, many of us left our heads on their pikes. The doctor said you had been beaten and bones broken and he'd not seen a body so damaged and still functioning. You are of Celene bloodlines, is it the Seillach that protected you from certain destruction and insanity?"

"Got me. Sometimes, I feel like I've died a hundred deaths, Selwyn," I said wearily. "I've lost my mother and father twice, my world, friends, hopes, dreams and realizations. My dad tried to give me a normal childhood and even that was taken away from me. What was yours like?"

"I am one of seven; four of us went into the military and serve the King. Two have made the Heart Forces. Both are dead now. They fought the Druz at Galwyn Pass and perished most honorably."

"Which kid were you?" He looked puzzled and I explained. "Oldest? Youngest? Middle kid?"

"Kid? We call the young of goats' *kid*," he laughed. "I am the second to the oldest. The elder is Lord now, Lord of Peleyn Mountain, a duchy not far from Fangmoor. We are actually cousins of sorts but then, most of the higher ranked officers in the Forces are of the landed nobles and are related. I have three sisters, two are wedded and with children. The other you know."

"Zip? Zip is your sister?" I was nervous, wondering if he knew I'd....

He grinned at me. “Don’t worry, Jade. My sister is no shrinking flower and can well defend her own virtue without my help. She was doing fine on Pengarm in the slave caves before we found her.”

“How did she wind up a captive?”

“Curiosity. She ventured too close to a Druz encampment and was cornered, taken and brought to their base as slave labor. They did not know who she is or that she was female or she would have wound up in Coelanth’s harem. Raping Celene women is one of his great passions in life although he prefers young boys.”

My stomach dropped in horror. I wondered what had been done to me while unconscious. He took pity on me. “If he had taken you, Jadewyn, you would be dead. Druz... members are large and barbed, it would have torn your insides when it ejaculated. Besides, Dr. Chryon checked you for internal injuries and found none of that sort. No, they merely drained you of blood and beat you.”

“They said my blood tasted good,” I shivered.

“It is imbued with the power of the Tree and the Seillach Pangorum. It would be like the finest wine, the most exquisite food, powerful drug, an irresistible perfume to the Druz. Then, your blood is power, a conduit to the Tree and would allow a Druz Warrior Priest to approach, touch and control the Tree. The next best thing to controlling you and the Coin.”

I opened my hand and stared at the coin. It pulsed with a faint greenish gold beat. “What is this thing?”

“Some say the heart of the Tree. Some say, the eyes of the Deity that created us. I think it is a seed. The seed of the Tree, containing all its knowledge, power and memories.”

“The Tree has memories,” I said slowly, remembering my won communion with it. I looked off in the distance, seeing not the walls of the office by the Great Tree in the lobby of a Boston high rise. “Selwyn, is the Tree on earth plane or all planes? Can I access it only there or anywhere?”

“It is said that it exists nowhere and everywhere. If you touch it on one plane, you touched a permanent nodule where a portion of it spilled over. Its power is available to you anywhere, any plane.”

“The Priests guard it on my plane, I mean Earth.”

“Then it must be there always.”

“I need to touch it,” I murmured and resolved to find a way to return to question it.

## Chapter 35

I found a small antechamber in the palace next to my guards’ bedroom near the barracks and armory and some thing because it was in such close proximity to hundreds of Guardsmen, they didn’t constantly check on me. So, I was able to practice what I called *stepping out* without them being the wiser.

I found that if I clasped the coin, thought of the Tree and earth and *pushed*, I could feel my body moving through a space not unlike the gray corridors that the Druz had taken me through when they had caught me. I sensed the use of the coin’s power but it was muted somehow, tempered with the Tree’s flavor and did not ripple along the chords to warn anyone save me. Trouble was, I did not have the finesse to pinpoint any one particular plane, especially the one I wanted. I was a traveler on a world where women ruled with an iron fist; another where giant insects like butterflies waged war on flower faced miniature humanoids, elves if you will. Another I swore was Prime Earth until the natives turned their backs and became hollow masks. I wasn’t able to stop and enter any of these realms but only passed through as a ghost figure.



When I came back to the little room, only minutes seemed to have passed and because I was alone, no one noticed my lack of attention. Finally, I simply cast myself out and let my mind drift with no thoughts of anything or anyone. Sensed a spark of interest and some *thing* reached out and poked me with a casualness that made me feel like an ant under a buffalo's hoof. I felt an immense presence, a power equal to that of God and it stunned me.

"What manner of being are you?" it asked.

Impertinent because I was scared, I came back with, "Who or what are you?"

Startled, it gaped and then laughed. "A flea! An insignificant flea barks at me! You are a man creature, a child I divine. Human. You carry the essence of Siohymn. Ah, so you are the Wielder of Chaos lines."

"If you mean I'm the string bearer, you'd be correct." A huge force seized me in its grip yet it was with a delicate touch as if it knew I was fragile and transported me through time and space to a dimension, a realm that I knew with sudden and gut wrenching certainty was the beginnings of all, an Entropy that existed before the Universe, before Creation, before everything.

An eye the size of a planet blinked tightened and shrank to the size of a whale. "Ah, that's better," a huge Volkswagen sized mouth exhaled and nearly blew me halfway across the wherever. He shrank further until I was staring at a human face that looked remarkably like my dentist only he had hair. Long, curly hair. He held me between two fingers and that part of him was still the size of a giant. "What is your name?"

I shut my mouth and swallowed. "You look like Doctor Jeff."

"I know. I took the image from your string echo. You are called Jadewyn from the plane Celene. And Earth. Interesting, that you should have two echoes."

"If you know, why ask?"

"It's called conversation, little flea. Don't be rude, impertinence only gets you so far. Besides, if I read your mind like you think, it would burn out your brain like...oatmeal." He closed his fingers and pinched; my lungs stopped and so did my breathing. I blanched and he lessened his grip.

"Okay, okay," I gasped, able to breathe again. "Yeah, my name is Jadewyn James. I was born on Celene but raised on Earth. The Druz killed my mom and dad.

"You know you sent them all to a very nasty place, almost unlivable. Worse than their home plane. Then, they are not a particularly attractive or beneficial race. I was just getting around to doing something drastic about them. What do you want?"

"Want?" I asked stupidly.

"*You* called *me*. You must want something. Don't sputter; it's all mixed up in your head. Nasty place, that. How do you find anything? You are a seething mass of wants, how do you keep all those thoughts and emotions in check?" his face softened, an expression I did not recognize on my dentist's likeness. He was a hardass when it came to oral hygiene. "No, I cannot bring back your parents. Once a Chaos line is broken, it changes the fate of everything it touches, in ways both miniscule and finite. But you know this."

I swallowed. "I want to learn how to travel to Earth so that the Colonel/Druz can't track me. I want to bring Murphy back without any harm coming to him. I want my world to be the way it was before the Druz attacked it."

"The Siohymn, what you call the Seillach Pangorum in your blood makes you powerful; able to travel anywhere you desire but leave your essence behind. Many places have worshipped this as a god. Your blood has many powers, the least of which makes men addicted. You are the

Chaos Reader, the Holder of the Strings; you have the ability to skate along any line forward or back and can find anything or any place. Use it to reach your plane. Step lightly; there are those that are sensitive enough to feel your touch upon the Strings.

“If I can go forward or back, why can’t I go back and tweak my dad’s string before so he doesn’t die?”

“Jadewyn, you can observe but you can’t change the past. You know how this works, a butterfly’s wings flap in Boston, a typhoon is born in Asia,” he spoke somberly.

Slowly, I nodded. It was the old adage, for want of a nail... He closed his fingers and the last thing I heard was, “Interesting little flea. I’ll keep an eye on you.” His giant eye was the last thing I saw.

## Chapter 36

The place I found myself next was the corner of two busy intersection on a downtown Boston Street just around the corner from the Celene foundation. I was in jeans, t-shirt and a down jacket with a baseball cap on my head. He, it must have read my mind and dressed me according to my memories. Ugh, I didn’t like the idea of someone running around in my thoughts. It was cold, bitter cold and deep into winter with dirty snow on the ground and slush in the gutters. The sky was that pure blue that is too cold to stay out in, the air made your lungs freeze. I took a deep breath, caught the tang of salt and river and knew I was home. The greatest part was that my arm was no longer in a cast and when I moved it, I found no evidence of broken bones, any residual weakness or pain. Even my black and blues were completely gone.

Walking carefully up the slippery sidewalk, I passed pedestrians that didn’t give me a second glance or a cheery hello. Then, Boston in the snow on a cold afternoon didn’t elicit a strong conversation, the chill made both cheeks and mouth burn. No one noticed me.

I walked two blocks to the main doors of the towers and twiddled the strings, touched the essence of the coin, but didn’t use it nor alert any of the Dursvan, priests or Tree that I was on its Threshold.

More mundanely, the security guards prevented me from casually waltzing inside, I’m sure they were well aware of my looks to recognize me. I took the idea from the big dude. Made myself look like someone else, a friend from high school and slipped through the metal detector under the watchful eyes of the guards. Inside, the temperature was a comfortable 72° even just past the doors and the frigid outside. Tropical plants and flowers grew everywhere but I had eyes only for the Tree. The lobby was curiously frantic, as if everyone inside was preparing for a disaster and evacuation. No one spotted me until I was almost at the foot of the Tree. Heat waves came off it and made the air shimmer like a mirage. I stepped forward a half dozen strides, hands outstretched and dropped my parka at the very edge of her shadow. Voices trilled in alarm and shouts of STOP! penetrated my sudden concentration.

“NO! It’ll harm you!” I recognized that voice, it was Revenal Juris and he was joined by one of the Elders who restrained him as I stepped into the penumbra of the Tree’s influence. Her bark was pleasantly warm and thrummed. I put both hands on the smooth outer skin and then leaned my forehead into her. I fell *into* the Tree.

I didn’t need to ask her anything, it was all out there for me to see and understand. I found a way to banish the Druz threat, diminish the Colonel’s presence, let Murphy and all the others come and go on their own planes without danger or a terrible payment.

She wanted me to stay; I could not. Such an existence of only mental activity was not for me—no body, no air moving through my lungs, no sense of touch in my fingers or on my skin.

No, I wanted my thin envelope, the ability to feel pain as well as pleasure. I said goodbye and oozed myself back into the world that I considered real as each plane was to their inhabitants.

“Jadewyn,” Juris said and stepped forward into my reach to pull me out of the Tree’s embrace and led me to a door behind the retaining wall. Dazed, I let him manhandle me into a metal chair and check me over for damages. He rolled my hands over and inspected the palms, finding no evidence of any wounds, burns or hurts. “Where did you go, Jadewyn?” I was asked and hesitated before I spoke.

“To the heart of the Tree. Inside her, to ask her how to end this war.”

“Did she tell you?” his face wore a look of intensity and I did not answer for I saw his fears in his eyes.

“Where are the Druz? Are they still a threat?” the others asked.

“Not to you or the other planes,” I answered carefully.

“Does Fetherwyn know where you are?”

“No.” I looked at Juris. “How did you get here? I left you on Celene and the Gates are closed.”

“You called me hence, Lord Jadewyn, when you cried out for help. I was able to slip through a gate that was unknown.”

“Who else?”

“Your friends and the Lady Zyperia. They wait upon your consent to enter here.”

“Since when do they need permission to come into my room?”

“You barred the door behind us,” he pointed out and I looked. Sure enough, the door was sealed shut with magical runes and metal gates. I wasn’t aware that I had done that.

“How do I open it?” I muttered and waved a hand. The door burst open to let the four of them fall in on their hands and knees. We stared at each other and then I went to help them up. Boy, did I get a tongue-lashing.

### *Chapter 37*

Murphy bundled me into the back seat of the cop car, covered me with blankets and Zip sat next to me. He planned to sneak all of us into the Precinct and gather up all the SWAT team who would formulate a plan to do ‘something’ about the Colonel. I let him knowing it was the safest way to return him to his family.

I watched from under the blanket as he drove through the city streets bypassing the Big Dig and taking secondary routes around the city. He drove grim faced and did not acknowledge any other police vehicles even as they waved to him.

I wanted out from under, this blanket smelled like sweaty socks and vomit. Every time I tried to sit up, Zip pushed my head back down.

“So,” she spoke unexpectedly and startled me. I almost jumped out of my skin. “What’s your big plan to save the world and all the planes?”

“What?” I asked stupidly, feeling my face redden. I threw aside the reeking blanket and sat up.

Murphy joined in. “Jade, when you get all quiet and that frown on your face, you’re contemplating some stupid scheme and how to implement it. Remember, I’ve known you since you were two years old.” He pulled into the Precinct’s underground garage, waved casually to the open-mouthed sergeant and into what used to be his old SWAT parking spot. I saw six other team members’ personal vehicles parked there and this gave me pause.

“What day is this?” I asked and Murphy frowned.

“A good day to be alive. Why?”

“Why is all the team here?”

He looked around, named off his buddies. “Unless it’s payday, we never meet up at Base at the same time, not even on a mission.” No, they met on the site or nearby in the SWAT-mobile.

“TacOps meeting? God, how long have we been gone, Jadewyn? Months? Years?” He looked at the car, turned on the computer and scrolled through the screen containing all the info from Dispatch and Boston PD. “Says it’s Feb. 28, 2013. Wednesday. Zip, you notice he didn’t answer your question. He bypassed it with another, he’s good at that. Deflecting anything that interferes with his main issue. Jade, what are you up to?”

“Oh, you know, saving the world and your asses.” We jump as the tap came on the window and about forty cops stood around the cruiser. A lieutenant I’d never seen before held the butt end of a mag lite on the glass.

“Holy Christ! Murphy, get your ass out here!” he barked and he did just that, shoving the door open into the mass of flesh. Hands plucked at him, voices raised in wonder that he was alive and solid. Then, they turned their attention to me and although he protested, they dragged both of us out. Stood Zip to the side and examined me from head to toe. I endured it, knowing that these dudes had known me from the time I’d been old enough to crawl.

“Where the fuck you been for the last six months? You, you’re dead. Buried. I went to your funeral. Carried your fucking coffin and saw you buried next to Fanny and AJ.”

“Reports of my death were grossly exaggerated,” I quipped. “Are you under martial law, lock down, anything... weird?”

“Weird? Like what? Alien takeover, government conspiracies?”

“What is Colonel Brightarm doing?”

“You mean President Brightarm?” he countered and I reared back in shock

“He’s the President? What happened to Obama?”

“He was killed in the first wave of attacks by the Druz alliance. Brightarm stepped in and took over. Pushed the bastards back. Mopped up what resistance was left a few weeks back. We’re still not back to normal but he promised an end in the next month.”

I looked at Murphy and shrugged. This didn’t bode well for my plans. “Are there any other events you care to enlighten us with?” I asked as they escorted us into the Precinct and the Captain’s office. Captain Jacobs rose, stared at me, Murphy and Zip. He then pushed everyone else out and slammed the door behind us. He touched me. On the shoulder, face and belly as if to confirm that I was real and solid. He jerked my shirt open and his fingers roamed over the scar on my ribs where I’d cut myself on the bottom of a coke bottle on the firing range at Dad’s target practice. He was the one who had taken me for stitches because Dad had freaked out at the sight of me bleeding.

“It *is* you,” he shouted and hugged me so hard I thought he’d crack my ribs. I endured the quick squeeze stiffly.

“Of course it’s me,” I replied. “Who else? You expecting the Easter Bunny? What’s wrong with everybody?”

“You’re wanted for murder and were declared an enemy of the Government, Jade. A terrorist. Anyone spots you; they’re to call a special number immediately.”

“I thought I was supposed to be dead,” I pointed out. I stared around the office. Nothing had changed except for the portrait of the President. Still had all his commendations and badges from all over plastered on the walls. Big old desk, four windows and ugly pull up blinds. My eyes teared when I saw the photo of my Dad in his dress blues.

“That’s why no one’s reported you missing. Since the Changeover, things are different around the country.” He stared pointedly at Zyperia. “Who is she, Murphy?”

“The Lady Zyperia of Celene. She’s high royalty and a Throne Warrior. Jade’s bodyguard. Changeover, Cap? What the fuck’s that?”

Captain Jacobs explained. “The government and the Druz Hierarchy joined forces to repel the invaders, form a coalition to patrol the planes and protect earth. In exchange for that, we have only to provide them access back and forth.”

“The Druz are the enemy,” I snarled and Murphy kicked me.

The Captain shrugged. “They stopped the war in the middle east. In fact, no one’s fighting anywhere on earth. Except under Druz leadership and Brightarm’s authority.”

“Let me guess, that was Brightarm’s idea?” I returned. “How long has he been in office?”

“He stepped in eight months ago.”

“I thought we had a democracy and the people elect the president,” I protested.

The Captain snorted. “Not on this world. He’s in as long as he wants. No one will oppose him with those... things backing him.”

“Great,” I muttered. Now I had to figure out how to get into the White House, get by his Secret Service and take out the most protected man on the planet.

### *Chapter 38*

Zyperia, Murphy and I were holed up in the Captain’s townhouse in upper Boston and I was going stir crazy. My bodyguards were outside the kitchen door keeping an eye out for anyone suspicious or out of context. I had received a phone call from Juris inquiring where I was and what I was up to, with both bodyguards reporting in a language too swift and monotone to translate.

The Captain’s wife cooked or the little company and I ate until I thought I would bust. She was a pretty woman with silver yellow hair and kind blue eyes. She had been especially fond of me since I’d found her great-grandmother has lost diamond stone years back. She made the comment that she’d rather clothe than feed me, my throat tightened up as my eyes welled at the same words my mom had often said to me. Zip stared, rubbed my shoulders as I pushed back from the kitchen chair bolting for the bathroom where I bawled into a towel to muffle my sobs.

I mourned. For my mom, my dad, my world but mostly for me. There were things I would never know because of my circumstances and my shoulders were only so broad. I felt as if I carried the weight of the universe on them.

A soft knock on the door preceded the call. “Jade?” Murphy’s concerned words penetrated the hardcore door. I wiped my eyes and swallowed.

“Yeah?”

“You okay?”

“Yeah. Burned my tongue,” I flushed, washed off my face and opened to him. No one commented on my red eyes or dripping nose. I pretended nothing had happened. “So,” I said and cleared my throat. “What are we going to do?”

“I thought you had a plan, Jade.” I looked away from Murphy’s face.

“I did have but that was before I found out the Colonel was President. How am I going to get past the Secret Service and the Druz? They will... smell me coming. In fact, I’m surprised that the Colonel doesn’t know already that I’m back.”

The Cap interrupted. “He does, Jade. Twenty minutes ago, the FBI put out an alert to all Law Enforcement agencies with your description and name. They are planning an assault on Celene Towers, calling it a terrorist stronghold.”

“Good luck with that. The Tree will protect herself,” I retorted.

“Even with access to your blood?” Zip questioned and I was silent, digesting that.

“She is sentient and knows the difference between me as a being and the presence of my blood,” I answered carefully, almost positive. “Plus, I’ve warned her.”

“What will Brightarm do?” The Captain asked.

“He’s already a martial law dictator,” I pointed out. “He’ll head for Celene next and then the rest of the planes. He’ll look for the real Druz, try to bring them back to rape, pillage and slaughter everyone alive. I don’t know if he can access the other planes without me.”

“What you mean the ‘real’ Druz?”

“I sent them all to hell physically. What’s here are the... Leftover essences married to human bodies in a hybrid alliance, the best and worst of both worlds.”

“Why?” Selwyn demanded, and I paled as I answered him.

“Because I screwed up. When I sent them away, I tore their strings. It was too much for the... balance. Nature fill the vacuum with another threat. I can’t eliminate the problem, I have to destroy it.”

“Uh oh. I don’t like the sound of that,” Murphy muttered.

“You should see it from my side,” I said under my breath. “How close to DC. Can you get me?” I stared at Captain Jacobs.

“I don’t know. Probably closer than you can get on your own. I take it you can’t use your... talents to get you inside.”

“No. Not without calling the Druz attention to me. I’d rather avoid that,” I said with tight lips.

“Ya think?” Murphy rolled his eyes and the captain nodded.

“I can send Murphy, Reilly in your bodyguards and a SWAT vehicle to DC. There have been rumors of a faction eager to cause trouble. They be grateful to get the extra help.”

“When?” I paste, staring out the windows and was aware that no one was lounging around the neighborhood, no kids on bikes, no Jalvers on what was once a well-used to track. No pedestrians of any kind. The streets were eerily quiet.

“People are afraid, Jade,” he spoke softly. “If you stand out too much, or are... Different, you disappear.”

“Have you heard of the Celene foundation?” I asked idly, my hands were clenched into fists, and I felt my nails digging into the skin.

“Yes. Brightarm has tried to annex them, but their headquarters or out of state now and he can access the building. He’s tried, but it’s warded. Can you get in?”

I didn’t respond, that answer was unhealthy for him to know. I turned the Selwyn and my other bodyguards and spoke to them in my mother’s tongue. “I must leave and no one can come with me. Can you support this?” Their faces protested violently, but neither spoke. “No one. Your strings will announce me; put me in danger faster than if I shouted in the streets.”

“We cannot protect you, if we cannot see you,” Kiannyn snarled.

Zip stepped in. “I will guard him,” she said quietly. I shook my head. “Do not protest they will sense me, Jadewyn as you know that is a lie. The Druz never felt me in their midst until *you* came.” I shut my mouth. “I am as well trained in the arts, the Selwyn, Eilywyn or Kiannyn.”

“Murphy, I need to be an Epic Park by tomorrow night. Can you get me there?” I named the small park near the Potomac River and the Beltway.

“Yes,” he said. Amidst the violent argument, I packed what I needed and sat, waiting for the captain to produce a vehicle.

## Chapter 39

Why was dawn such a favorite time for nefarious activities? There I was, hunched over a picnic table in the woods nearly puking my guts out and unable to see either the trail or the other obstacles around me through the haze of watering eyes and shifting shadows. The closer I approached to Brightarm's territory, the louder and more disturbing became the signature of the Druz, their strings tangled with a vibration that scraped that my nerves like a mosquitoes whine. I had thought them no longer a threat since I'd sent them to hell, but the residue of their...spirit had created the worst enemy, in combining with men, a hybrid with all the knowledge of magic and human technology.

Zyperia pushed back my head and wiped the sweat off my forehead as she ran her fingers through my soaked hair. "Jade, you're burning up," she fretted and pulled her backpack off to rummage in it. I wiped my mouth off on my T-shirt and heaved my stomach back down.

"Quiet!" I hissed. "There are soldiers hidden in the underbrush. They'll spot us."

"What are we going to do?" Her eyes, large green and luminous glowed like a night cats in the flowering sunshine. I looked around. We stood in a small clearing set aside for a campsite with a picnic table, iron campfire ring, barbecue pit and a post with the number and electrical hookup. I knew this park had a reputation. Only a few hundred yards behind me was a jogging trail where a congressional page lady had been attacked, raped and murdered.

I could still feel the abrupt snapping of her string, trace the cascading ripples as her death affected a million others in ways too minuscule for anyone but a string reader to notice.

"What's making you sick, Jadewyn?"

"Don't you sense it? Smell it? Feel it?" I was astonished that the heavy dirge of the enemy miasma did not cloy at the back of her throat, sit on her chest like an angry jinni, weigh her down as if she carried an unbearable secret. It hurt to breathe, to move and to stand erect. I hunched my shoulders and leaned on the table with my head on my arms. Sweat plastered my shirt to my skin yet the breeze felt like icy fingers poking and prodding. A groan escaped me.

"Jade," her voice was worried and uncertain. Sunrise sent slivers of gold through the trunks and branches of gaunt unclothed trees. Speared the ground and illuminated a carpeted forest floor of dead leaves, pea gravel and ruts from four-wheel-drive ATVs. No broken branches littered the ground; too many campers picked off the dropped pieces for free firewood.

"There are men hiding to the right, Jadewyn," she whispered and I nodded.

"On the left, too. And behind us." I gathered myself, put both hands on the planks, felt the mossy softness of the wood exposed to the seasons and climbed atop. Spreading my arms, I shouted the words to bring the Seillach coin to full power. Trees bloomed around us. Grass, sprung up beneath our feet. Flashes of light that could be *felt* illuminated the clearing; made the faces of the enemy squad look like zombies. Here and there, brilliant blue fire pulsed in their eyes.

"Jade," she whispered and I felt her climb up behind me, her thin shoulder blades knocked into mine.

"Welcome, Lord of the Strings," a blue-eyed warrior stepped forward and he held not only a riot gun, but also a Druz stun rod. His rank I noted was Captain in Special Forces. He was more than human, his arms hung nearly to his knees, and he was bulked up larger than normal. He was more than half Druz.

"Why are you here, Lord?"

"To challenge your Master," I answered.

"I will call him."

“No need,” I returned, and clenched the coin so that the rivulets of her power arched from my fingers. “He will have sensed me, and felt the shift of energies.” I aimed the coin and blew them all to vapor. We waited, heard the droning of helicopters and the strident voices of men approaching amid sirens.

## Chapter 40

He came surrounded by a score of men all over six foot six; everyone had that eerie blue fire at the back of their eyes. I knew them by the faint subtle smell of ozone, and they wore their humanity like a well-fitting suit. Many were Secret Service and qualified warriors; they stood slightly to his side dressed in Kevlar body armor. He was as well armed as his men. His eyes flickered to my hands, to Zip and behind me. “You came alone?” His tone was disbelieving, almost a sneer. “No, bodyguards, no army? Just you and a... girl?”

Zyperia slid her face over my shoulder. “A Heart Warrior, Throne Guard, and not just a girl,” she spat. “And the Lord of the Strings.”

“Ah,” he said softly. “And I am the String Cutter.”

Leaping forward, he brought forth the bat, wrapped in leather. I threw up my hands, opened them so that the glow from the Seillach Bane arched into the space behind us as a shield. The shaft came down and I braced myself for the impact on the shield and was astonished when it pierced through my protection as if mist, as it smashed into my forearms like matchsticks scattering. The cracks were louder than thunder and as Zip pulled me away, my arms felt broken and numb.

“It is the wood from the Tree!” She gasped. “Against it, you have no defense! Run!” I landed, half on the picnic bench and half on the ground. I couldn’t move, I couldn’t get my arms under me to struggle up. She tried to drag me out of his reach. Brightarm slashed again, hitting me in the ribs and I felt him them crack. I couldn’t breathe; saw red and flashes of black. She tried to pull me away, and he pushed the cudgel into my stomach, holding me to the ground. I struggled to move, could only push ineffectually with my feet at the slick surface of the staff, felt the essence of the Tree, and was neutralized by it. My hands would not close. I couldn’t feel my fingers, my arms hung limp from the shoulders. Black sparks hovered in my vision. I saw the end of the branch heading for my face; saw an explosion of stars and then—nothing. I floated. A pinprick of sensation and then, even that was gone.

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Chains. Woke up in chains. Hanging from my ankles, swinging slowly in a parabola in the room that I had seen many times on TV and in history books. I was in the Oval Office, looking out on the Rose Gardens, between the most famous desk in the world in the window.

Everything hurt. Dully. Masked by some kind of pain meds, as if I was lost in a dream, knew I was dreaming, but couldn’t wake myself up. My fingers could almost touch the carpet. I tried to lift my upper half to what held me to the ceiling, but the moment I tried to bend, my ribs screamed with pain and a thin bleat escaped my lips.

“Welcome, Lord of the Strings,” the President’s amused words penetrated my delirium. “As you will presently discern, you are a guest of the White House and prisoner of the Druz/human alliance.”

“Zip,” I managed to say as he pushed me to circle around so that I saw her in the chair and the muzzle of a rifle and Druz stun rods on her. She looked unhurt save for a black eye and split lip. “Zip?”

“I’m fine, Jadewyn,” she smiled. “These humans are nowhere near as torturous as the Druz.”



“Not so, Zyperia,” Brightarm snickered. “You have only to look at Jade.” In dry tones, he went through my various aches, pains and breaks as each one made themselves known in excruciating detail. “He’s only feeling enough to keep them at bay; I had the doctors give him just enough Fentanyl to mask some of the pain.”

“Jade!” She cried. “Speak the words! Bring forth the Seillach’s power!”

“I can’t,” I sobbed. “The Tree binds me!”

“What are you going to do with him?” He laughed, twirled me around, pulling on my ankles and slapped me playfully on the ass. “Oh, I think we’ll find a use for him, zip, is it? Who are you? His girlfriend? You can’t be a bodyguard. You’re too inept and were taken too easily.” He frowned. “Heart Warrior? Aren’t they supposed to be invincible until death? Or was this some plan to get close to me?”

“Yeah,” I groaned. “I planned on being tortured and broken to get you to let down your guard. Is it working?”

He sneered. “We don’t need the girl. Take her to CIA headquarters and lock her in the crypts. She’ll keep. What is your name, girl?”

I tried to tell her not to speak but she spoke before I could get the air. “Zyperia Fetherwyn Ethelyn,” she said quietly and proudly.

He was still. “Fetherwyn’s kin. Are you, his daughter?”

“No.”

“Cousin, then. Will he barter to get you back?”

“He would toss me aside to get Jadewyn back,” she said.

“We all know the value of the String Bearer,” he returned. “I know you can’t call the power as the Tree binds you, Jade. Part of her influence is here now.” He poked me in the ribs, just under the last one on my right side and I felt a warm stab of pain rush my muscles and clenched my stomach. I tightened my butt muscles; felt my insides cramp and liquid ran down my back as my bowels loosened. A foul smell filled the room.

“I had a 2 inch piece of my staff rammed into your gut, Jade. It’ll fester, poison and eventually kill you. When you’re close, I’ll take the Seillach from you and the power.”

“When I am dead, the coin is gone forever,” I moaned.

“Not if I snatch it from your dying fingers. That is how your mother took it from your father and you from her. As I will from yours.” He took one of the Druz rods from the guard and stuck it in my chest, held it there until I heard all I heard were her screams and the popping of my skin as it sizzled.

## *Chapter 41*

The walls were gray, dark and padded. I was lying on a metal slab covered with a thin foam that crinkled when I moved. Movement was in millimeters, I could not find one inch of me that did not hurt. The worst was the area under my ribs where he said he had stabbed me. The Tree’s splinter gave both pain and pleasure, a warmth that tried to heal me and poison as it fought the Seillach’s power. I would’ve thought that both would meld and join but they fought each other’s influence. Blood caked my skin and made the foam under me tacky. I tried to move

my arms to rub at my eyes and my fingers curled helplessly. My mouth opened and cold air hit broken teeth, it made my face ache with sudden sharp jabs. I cried out, tried to call the Seillach and stifled the words before the glow could emanate. The door hissed open and a shadowy outline stood over me. I smelled alcohol.

“Don’t try to speak. Or move,” a man ordered. “I’m here to clean you up. This will hurt, but I’m not sure if you’ll notice amid all the other damage.” A needle stuck me in the ass; I hadn’t even realized that he’d turned me. Cold trickle down my sides as he wiped me with something that felt like steel wool but was only 4 x 4 gauze pads. “I want you in the trauma suite,” he grumbled. “But the Colonel won’t allow it. He said you wouldn’t die. But I have my doubts. You were beaten to an inch of your life. Both of your arms are broken, both shoulders, most of your ribs and one knee is shattered. I’m not sure about your right thigh. Your nose cheekbone and eye orbit, you have broken several of your teeth and all the fingers on your right hand. If you recover. You may never walk again. You have an abdominal puncture that may have pierced your intestines and may have nicked the kidney. He even *nailed* your palms to the floor. The floor of the Oval Office, for God’s sake.”

“God has nothing to do with it.” I exhaled, running my tongue over my teeth. “Who are you?”

“Doctor Martini. I’m a liaison to the CIA and the personal physician to the Vice President.”

“Who’s that?”

“Biden.” He looked at me funny. Do you think you have any memory loss?” He examined my eyes. Really? As badly as I was beaten. He didn’t think I had memory loss?

“No. I remember everything that happened to me, except for after the stun rod in the gut. When I left this plane, Obama was President. Biden was his VP.”

“Brightarm became President after the Changeover. When the Druz integrated and pushed out the invaders.”

I laughed dryly, as I coughed and closed my eyes. “The Druz are the invaders.” Pain made my vision dancing crazy spirals. I came to with his hand under my neck and an oxygen mask over my mouth and nose. “I told you not to talk or move,” he chided. Pushing his hand away with my forearm, I mumbled around the plastic cup.

“You see a girl? With hair and eyes like mine?”

“If you don’t shut up, I’ll knock you out,” he threatened. I tried to swing my legs and couldn’t move. He held his palm on my chest. “Your leg is broken, mid-thigh, below the knee. Someone jumped on them. They’re not splinted so unless you want bone fragments as sharp as a knife. Your muscles don’t move.”

“Bless them.”

“He won’t let me.”

“Then kill me,” I was exhausted. I felt everything melting; shutting down a shock invaded my system.

“He will let you do that, either. I took the unit of blood from you and replaced it with two that he gave me.”

Shuddering in our horror at, I stared at him. “What’s he doing with my blood?”

“Something about controlling the tree. What tree?”

“The Tree is the repository of all the Strings.” I closed my eyes.

I opened weary lids. “You have to remove the splinter in me.”

“Not without a surgical suite, anesthesia and a surgical team. Besides, I’m not even sure if you’d make it through the surgery.”

“You have to. The fate of your world, my world and all the worlds depends on it.”

“You’d bleed to death before I got into the site,” he protested. “Shock alone will kill you.”

I tried to laugh and grimaced instead. “Shock is killing me now. My blood pressure is dropping, my heart racing. I’m cold, thirsty and feel like I’m losing it. Give me a knife, I’d do it myself only, I can’t feel my fingers.” I could see them, black, bloodied and bent at impossible angles.

“I can’t do anything for you but make you comfortable, keep you unconscious for the Colonel.”

“If you don’t help me, you’ll die. All of us. The world, everything you know, everything you care about and everything you love.”

“What do you mean?”

I stared at him. “I’ve tangled the strings of every living thing in existence. If I die, they’ll be torn loose and destroyed. In a fact, I’ve join my heartbeat to the universe’s heartbeat. It can’t be undone, replaced or changed. Only cut. When it’s cut or broken, everything ceases. No world, no planes, no Druz, no Colonel. No me and no you.”

“Are you crazy?” He burst out. “You think he cares? This is about power and ruling the world!”

“No,” I said sadly. “It’s about destroying everything so someone else can’t have it all.” I turned away from him and buried my face into the mattress.

## Chapter 42

Brightarm came by with food for me. He held out a tray with soup, something ground up and shake with a straw in it. He set it on the end of the bed and stared at me. I had been toileted by the Doctor but still had messed myself; I wasn’t capable of cleaning myself up and couldn’t do my own basic needs.

“How are you, Jade? You” he asked and I could not detect any mockery or sympathy in his words.

“What you want?” My tone was weary and depressed.

“I just came to tell you, we breached the Towers.” I opened my eyes wide. “Where has the Tree gone, Jade? It wasn’t there.”

I couldn’t help myself. I laughed. He was angry but did not take it out on me. He seemed puzzled. “It’s there and nowhere. On one plane and every plane,” I answered a little crazy in the head.

“I have 2 pints of your blood in me, Jadewyn. That’s what she calls you. I can almost feel her, almost sense her.” He grabbed my hand and held the palm up speaking the words to call the Seillach pangorum and a faint green glow lit my fingers. “Blood of my blood,” he whispered. “Bone of my bone.” He turned to someone out of my sight and snapped, “Get Martini. Tell him to ready the surgical team. I want him treated and fixed. He’s more valuable to me alive.” His hands cupped my face and forced my eyes to focus. “Jadewyn, why did you come here? To die?” I nodded. “Because in dying by my hand, you’ll force an end to this confrontation? What? The Tree feels you die, the Strings tear, and the Seillach blows up?”

“All of that,” I smiled. “The Druz will leave your soul. I brought them here. With my death, they go back to hell and you’re only a Colonel who meets his end in a bus accident crossing the street.”

He kissed me, teeth, deliberately nipping at my face and drew blood. He sucked, his eyes flared with that eerie blue glow, brightened and then he sent my head down on the mat. “My little blood bank,” he whispered. “How I will enjoy drinking from your fountain. Ah, Doctor Martini. Fix him up.” He stood and left me in the doctor’s care.

“Put him on the gurney. Careful now, he has several breaks that are open fractures. And I want an IV in him STAT, on Lactated Ringers, potassium and D5W. Two units of type A+. Jadewyn, are you in pain? I’m going to give you morphine. Actually, I’m going to put you under why all we take you for x-rays. This is going to be very painful. Get Trauma-3 ready, call my surgical team and have them set up to go in ten minutes.” I listened to him barking orders, barely had time to ask him to let me die before he stuck a plastic cup over my face and I watched his face recede to a pink moon with blue craters.

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When I woke, I was surprised to do even that—but I did wake in a suite of rooms decked out like a private one in a fancy hospital with several doctors, nurses and uniformed guards standing at my bedside. They were all looking down at me. “He’s conscious, Doctor Martini, Sir,” the speaker said. “We just took the ventilator tube out of your lungs. You had some major surgery and Oral surgery to repair broken teeth, your maxillary and orbital ridge. Jaw and eye,” he translated. My face felt huge, two black eyes swelled my vision nearly shut, and even my tongue felt as if a furry animal had died in there.

“Howloon?” I managed and tried to sit up. I had heavyweights all over my body; they must have buried me in 50 pounds of plaster.

“A week. We kept you under so you could rest without pain. How do you feel?”

“Weak. Hurts.”

“Frankly, you’re lucky to be alive. I had my doubts, but the Colonel said you would make it. Your system is totally out of human standards—nothing reads like I expect. Your blood pressure – well, it’s more like a tree than human. Then again, you’re not really human, are you?”

“The girl-Zip?” I asked trying again to get up and one of them lifted the back of the bed with the controls. I could see down the hallway through the open green door. I could see armed, uniformed personnel. “Fort Bragg?”

“Aramid. Containment and isolation labs. Level IV biohazard,” he answered me.

“Who are you?”

“Doctor Crater. Expert on Druz physiology and Celene anatomy.”

“How?”

“We’ve had a long time to study your people, Jadewyn,” he said gently. “This is Doctor Peterson, Doctor Martini you met already. Doctors Julkovich, Kleiner and Sampson. Neurologist, orthopedic surgeon, Microbiologist and a psychiatrist. I am a trauma surgeon and cardiac specialist. You have any questions?”

“Yeah. Why didn’t you let me die?”

“Do I really had to answer that?” He returned gently and almost kindly.

Doctor Martini interjected. “Give us the artifact and we will accommodate your wishes.”

“Where’s Zip?” I asked again.

“She’s down the hallway in another room. She’s okay. Do you want to see her?”

“Let her go, that’s what I want.”

“I’m sorry, we can’t do that. She’s the first cousin of the Celene king and is a valuable hostage,” Brightarm said as he came in the doorway. “Surprise to be alive, Jadewyn? I’ve

contacted both Revenal Juris and your generals. They're eager to make a trade. You for almost anything I suggested that the lady Zyperia might make a better swap and they did not hesitate."

"What are you going to do with me?"

"Keep you alive. Get you well and healthy, and then swap you for access to the tree.

Jurists assured me it would be granted. Should I return you alive and unharmed. Well at least alive."

"You won't do that," I stated.

He smiled. "We shall see."

### *Chapter 43*

The police van rolled to a stop in the fire lane behind the concrete barrier of the Towers. I was handcuffed, shackled and gagged in the back guarded by no less than four Druz/human hybrids whose eyes glowed flame blue, hot and hard. In their possession were stun rods and they were afraid to use them. Still, they treated me with kid gloves and had doped me up, X-rayed, splinted, sewn and medicated me to the point of stupor. I've almost felt human.

Druz technology has been used heal my breaks at a rate more rapid rate than my knowledge of human and Celene medical lore indicated. Therefore, I did not need heavy plaster on my breaks, but simple soft casts that Velcroed on. Walking was painful, but I could do it, and did not need the stretcher Martini had insisted they carried me on from the prison clinic to the van, although I was absurdly grateful that I did not have to limp that lengthy distance shackled like some serial murderer.

The nearest guard unlocked me from the cage and pushed me towards the door with his massive hand. The rest of him was nearly 7 foot high and built like a WWF wrestler. And as ugly. I opened my mouth, he removed the gag and four stun rods met my flesh. "Not one word," he threatened, and I nodded. I couldn't, anyway. The Doctor had wired my broken jaw so tight I could barely swallow my food through a straw. I'd lost weight in their care and clothes hung off my frame like a sack. I ran my tongue over what had been jagged stumps of teeth and was astonished that Brightarm had ordered them repaired also.

"You try to call the Seillach Pangarum and we will stun you, and then kill the lady," he threatened. I called him names under my breath and exited slowly and gingerly. Escorted me up the marble steps, I saw that they were pitted and broken, the doors hung askew. The lobby looked like a war zone. Gone were the bustling workers and in their place lounged Dursvan and Celene tactical forces fully armed and shielded. They made no move towards us, but followed with hard eyes as my guards marched me forward. The fountain sprayed, but where it had sparkled into a lazy pool with ferns and Koi fish now ran across the tiled floor to spill through cracks into the basement.

I looked up and where the tree should have been, a shimmering haze flowed from overhead, a beam of sunlight that came from a hole in the far off the roof. A giant hole that went as deep as it ran high where her roots should have anchored her to this world. Earth spilled over, gray and drained of life and nutrients.

I reached out a hand bound by cuffs and the tingle of chains brought in eyebrows raising. Revenal Juris stepped out of the mist in sunlight, his face blank of any emotion it. I saw tenseness in his jaw. Besides him where the Dursvan generals, my bodyguards, and Murphy. To my right were the remains of dad's precinct team.

"Jade," Murphy burst out and tried to reach me.

"Where's the Colonel and the lady Zyperia?" Juris demanded.

“Where is the tree?” My lead jailer snapped. “We have brought you the String Bearer. Do you wish to see him die, because you think to cheat the master?”

“You destroyed the Tree when you attacked the Towers!” Selwyn shouted.

The Druz laughed. “The Tree cannot be destroyed, only moved and directed. By the String Bearer and the Seillach pangorum.”

“Then where is it?” He turned to me, drawing a blade from his side and held it to my chest.

“Yes, String Bearer, where is it?”

I opened my mouth and shut it in frustration, shrugging instead. Behind me arrows of green flame shot overhead and a voice shouted the words that brought the Seillach to power. My jailer dropped his veil and became both Druz and Colonel Brightarm. He shook me, opened my palms to stare at my bare hands with the coin’s car. “How can this be?” He demanded furiously from me. Swords were drawn from scabbards around us, the sound like the shivering of a thousand bells chiming. Zyperia stepped onto the marble floor, and attacked. Brightarm knocked me to my knees, twisted one hand in my collar and charged to the side. Dragging me with him. “Attack!” He screamed and Druz dropped from the sky in droves, pushed up from cracks in the floor, poured from every hidden corner to meet the Dursvan and Celene soldiers that had come through Zip’s portal opened by her control of the coin.

“Jadewyn!” I heard and Brightarm dragged me under cover of a broken arch and made his way to the doorway of what had once been the Sanctuary. “What have you done?” He screeched, smashing a rod into my side. It jolted my insides to mush, and took away my ability to breathe.

My face flushed, and I was able to grind out between clenched teeth. “Gave up the power. The Tree resides no longer on this plane. Nor any other. Where she dwells, you cannot go. She is lost to you and your kind forever.”

He growled, and pushed his way to my ribs and twisted. My last breath left my lungs; warmth filled me, turning to a chill that made my lips and fingers blue. My mouth filled with blood, coppery and thick. I couldn’t swallow fast enough and began to choke on my own life’s fluid.

The blue of his eyes darkened and then burned incandescent as he drank in my soul. My string unraveled, the one I had never searched out or wanted to read. My eyes closed as a twisted line ripped loose from my grasp, jangling in a wild discord among the countless others. Vibrations ran along the bundle both forward and beyond, repercussions in the line of chaos that would be felt for millennium but not destroy this world, for I was no longer the wielder of the Seillach coin. My heart shuddered, limped and stopped. My flesh chilled, the green of my eyes glazed, my last breath swept over him like a cold shiver as he pulled the blade from between my dead ribs.

## *Chapter 44*

I stood on two solid legs yet I had roots planted neither in one place but many, had but two arms but many branches. I had red blood running through my veins and liquid fire rising like sap from my feet to the bridge of her crown.

The coin rested in her hand as Zyperia wielded green fire that struck the blue of my Druz enemies, and where that light touched them, nothing remained but a charred pile of ash that

drifted slowly as a dust devil. Men cried out, swords met steel, stun rods burned flesh, men fought other men, Celene killed Druz and Dursvan fought besides humans against humans. Gunfire erupted yet no bullets harmed the Seillach carrier, nor the Celene alliance. Blood had no substance here, only the weapons of the other plane had reality.

Zyperia forced her way forward under the Heart warriors to search for me. What they found was Brightarm kneeling with my body at his feet, my blood on his blade, his hand holding my chest off the ground. "You can't be dead!" He ground out, shaking me. "Damn you! Where is the Tree?" He dropped my body and turned to defend himself against her and her warriors joined her. Forced back by her wrath, the walls crumbled as they burned away until she stood before him with the last of his command. He snarled, "Your String Bearer is dead! You have no power over the Tree!"

"I have the power to finish with the Lord Jadewyn started!" She cried and squeezing her hands together, she glowed incandescent, the atomic proportions that washed over every Druz seeking their eyes. Green fire met the blue flame of their eyes and they melted, leaving nothing behind but an emptiness in the fabric of time and space. The Druz form was gone, as well as the human. The air vibrated, a sensation like worms crawling just under the skin and little flickers of static electricity bled off every surface. As it ceased, Celene soldiers and human warriors approached. Zyperia knelt at my side and pressed the coin into my palm as she ran her hands over my flesh. She screamed. "Murphy!"

He was there, holding up my head, his hands on the great vein in my neck, pulling at my shirt to expose the purple lips of that huge gaping hole to the left of my lower ribs. "Zip," he swallowed slowly. "He's gone."

He carefully gathered up my body, and carried it towards the portal that she had opened. Every Dursvan and Celene left alive followed their faces, grim and in shock. They brought me to the foot of the King's throne and placed me on the table. I saw, my Lord's face, and was astonished to see the anguish on his pale visage. "Dead?" He gasped. He ran his fingers across my bloody cheek. "Can you not save him?" He looked to Murphy and the priests. The tree rustled from her new berth in the Crystal Gateway, no longer bound on earth plane, but residing in the gate, she could be everywhere and nowhere at once. I stepped out of her living essence and stared at my mortal flesh. I called the coin back into the Tree's fire.

"Bring it to me," I said in my voice echoed like the wind in the forest's crown, like far-off thunder rumbling before storm of uncontrollable energy. They started, turned to look and rushed towards me. "Stop," I commanded. "Do not touch me; it is the same as touching the tree. It would burn you to the bone and kill you. New human flesh can contain the energies that feed the tree."

"Jadewyn, you're alive!"

"No," I returned. "Neither do I live nor am I Jadewyn. I am the soul of the Tree, the Weaver of Strings, and the Heart of the Universe. Bring me the Lord of the String's body." Eilwynn and Kiannyn picked up my flesh and Zyperia held my hand as they carried me to the foot of the tree. I bent, regarded the paper-white face with an enormous occluded green eyes, full lips covered with a thin trace of blood that had run from my mouth. My face was black and blue with swollen cheeks. What was left of my clothes were sorry rags and opened to show the gaping wound in the ribs. There was no blood for the dead cannot bleed. I touched him and his flesh felt cold and mortal, no longer part of me. They looked from my corpse to me, and back. Zyperia lifted her scarred hands towards me. Time stopped.

## Chapter 45-Epilogue

I stepped forward out of the Tree's aura and regarded my remains lying at the base of the Tree. The face was peaceful for all that I had perished in pain and defeat, white with blue lips, eyes blank with that strange far off glaze that said no one was home. Reaching down, I touched the hole in the chest, color flowed from my hands to disappear under the skin, and the glow changed the deathly pallor to that of something resembling life. I raised the corpse up, staring into those blank eyes.

"Jadewyn?" Zyperia whispered coming close enough to almost enter my aura. I spared her a glance.

"Don't," I said flatly and she stopped.

"Can you-?" she asked.

"I'm dead. What I was is left in this flesh and bone. What I am now is part of the Tree. You can't touch me or hurt me, you can only command me through the Seillach and I have that, too." I closed my hand on it as she reached through the barrier to grasp mine. Astonished, I looked into her eyes and saw compassion, regret, longing and something that made my heart or whatever had taken its place, race. Her skin did not blister or peel, it felt comfortably warm and solid in my own.

"Jadewyn," she said lovingly. "Come back to us, come back to *me*." She tugged and pulled me fiercely from the Tree's embrace to stand before them all. As I stepped through my mortal self, the skin tingled, pain burst into my head and warm hands caught me from every direction. Sweet air filled my lungs, softness was against my cheek and then there was the sensation of flying upwards as faint voices called me from far away.

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He was there again, the god that looked like my dentist only now, he was sitting on the rear end of a dragon whose ass looked like a faceted diamond, and the tail wrapped around his throat like a winter stole.

"Been in a bit of trouble, have you?" he quirked an eyebrow at me. "Still, I see you've fixed the Druz/human problem on your own without my help. You know you still have the Strings to protect? Even in death we can't relinquish those duties. No, you didn't cut your own strings, Jadewyn James. You were born outside the influence of the Strings so you cannot die. Or didn't you know that? I cannot let you dwell within the Tree, that gives too much power to one side and the balance would tip the other side in their favor. Nor would I let you sacrifice go for that lest the Darkness win and a worse menace than the Druz would have sprung up."

"Am I dead or what?" I managed, rubbing my head between the temples. It felt like a bomb had gone off behind my eyes.

"You managed to kill your mortal body but I've fixed it enough to let your healers do their job. Try to take care of this one. They're expensive to replace and hard to come by. Even for gods."

"Yeah, right. What do I do now?"

He laughed. "You're sixteen years old, Jadewyn. You have an exotic girlfriend waiting for you to open your eyes and show you that life is on another plane. Go enjoy it. Let your Honor Guard protect you. Be a boy, play. Live. Love. You'll know when Duty calls again. When I have need of you again."

"Brightarm?"

"I fulfilled his original destiny. Put things back so they'll make sense to all of you."

"How far back?" My heart rose at the thought of family not gone.



He shook his finger at me. “Jadewyn, I told you. I cannot return the dead once their strings are broken, unlike you. Your President Obama is still in office; your friend Murphy is still alive. The battle for the Towers and Tree did happen but the knowledge of the Druz is forgotten and this world unchanged as is Celene. Fetherwyn rules, your Honor Guards wait for you. She waits for you. I’ll give you a childhood before I call on you again, this is my promise.” He stood and bounded forward, hitting me square between the eyes and as I blinked, cried out and opened them in tears as the force of his blow knocked me backwards on my ass.

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Soft fingers wiped my cheeks; I smelled fresh fruit, passion berries and pineapple. Opening my eyes was a task equal to the same effort as climbing the steps of the Liberty Statue.

“He’s waking,” I knew that softly accented voice and the deeper tones of the man. “Jadewyn?” Deep green eyes looked into mine, blue ones to the left of hers in a face with a grizzled three-day beard. Lots of gray hairs and deep wrinkles. He had aged, this man Murphy. There were eyes surrounding me, some at sitting height, others at standing level.

“Jade?” Murph’s words echoed with the three Dursvan that were my bodyguards. On the other side of what was clearly a hospital bed, stood Revenal Juris, the King and senior people from the President’s staff. I raised my hand with the IV to my chest and explored the bulky mass I felt there.

“Jade, leave it alone. You just had surgery to repair a bloody big sword through your chest along with some rather nasty broken bones,” Murphy explained.

“My head hurts,” I complained.

“That’s an after effect of the Tree’s influence,” Juris told me. “We’re glad to see you open your eyes, my dear Lord. You need to rest, and get well. Let the King and Council deal with the mop up.”

Zip leaned over and kissed my forehead. “Sleep, Jadewyn. I will stay here; will be here when you wake.”

“I’m hungry,” I complained and she laughed, smiling brilliantly.

“When are you not, my heart?” She fed me not with food but love.

***The End.***