

Chapter 1: Off the Deep End

TUMBLING THROUGH INKY DARKNESS, I landed face first in the freezing ocean, legs and arms sprawled, grasping for anything solid. My breath whooshed out and the black water crashed over me, driving me under again and again until I was completely disoriented. Panicking, I flailed helplessly against the vicious surf. My head bounced against a jagged rock, starbursts of light exploded behind my eyes.

Out of the darkness, Killian's face swam in front of me like a mirage. The memory of his words echoed and disappeared like a dying breeze.

I will give you a child, Princess.

He'd smiled into my eyes and kissed me with promise.

Such beautiful promise.

Part of me wanted that...*his* child, our child...a tiny magical creature to carry on his name.

Part of me just wanted to practice.

But now, I felt nothing, sensed nothing. There was no wind, no ocean, nothing but darkness and absolute silence.

Was I in Hell?

Wasn't there supposed to be fire? Brimstone?

I squinted into the void and saw nothing, not even my hand in front of my face. If this was Heaven, it was a huge disappointment. Spending eternity in a black cocoon wasn't my idea of bliss. I was *claustrophobic*, didn't anyone remember that? Hello? Anyone?

Killian? Where are you?

I sent my thoughts to him in the darkness. His face shimmered in my mind, his voice coming from far away.

What are you doing? Get back to Sean! He's going to bolt!

Sean? He's already gone.

A great weight landed on my back and someone pushed me into the wet sand until my spine nearly cracked. Over and over again, someone shoved me into the sand until I thought I'd drown in it. My cozy world of darkness crumbled and both light and pain came pouring in even as the water poured out of my mouth.

"Good girl, do it again!" Strong hands pushed against my back until I coughed up all of the water in my lungs.

Gasping and coughing, I lay on the sand trying to stop the stars that circled my head like a cartoon.

"Come on, keep coughing." He turned me over to my side and hovered next to me while I coughed weakly.

Finally, I collapsed and closed my eyes trying to breathe normally. It hurt to inhale and I groaned and coughed some more. Being dead was far more comfortable...

Killian's voice came to me again. *That's my girl! Anchor him. Don't let him go!*

I sensed, rather than physically felt, the man next to me begin to pull away. He tensed as if he was about to stand up and I realized it must be Sean.

Anchor him? How?

I was saved from spending too much time thinking about this because he abruptly stood and stepped away from me. Feeling his sudden tension, I knew he was about to bolt. Instinctively, I

grabbed him around his ankle and dragged him down to the sand. Totally surprised, he fell on his butt with an indignant shout.

“What the hell are you doing? Let go of me!”

Sitting up without letting go, I choked out, “Where do you think you’re going? You can’t just leave me here in...” I looked around the gloomy sandy beach without a clue about where we were. “You can’t leave me here!”

He shoved furiously at my hand, but my grip was strong and I was a desperate woman. No way was I letting go. He raised a hand to me as if he’d use his powers to move me. He could probably throw me all the way back home if he wanted to. I lifted my own in challenge.

“You’d use your powers on me now? How low will you stoop?”

Lowering his hand, he flushed faintly. His voice held a sad note of desperation that tugged at my gut, just a little. “Damn it, Mica. What are you doing here?”

“Right now, I’m freezing to death. Can we *please* go somewhere with walls and a fire? You know where we are, right?”

Looking like he’d rather be spit-roasted in Hell than spend another minute with me, he agreed with bad grace. Gritting his teeth, he helped me up and watched detachedly as I wobbled on my feet. Making no move to steady me, he stood with arms crossed and glanced around the beach. Yeah, he totally didn’t want me here. Well, at least he didn’t let me die. That had to be a good sign...of course, he *was* my protector, my own personal Primani and they were supposed to be *angels*...of a sort.

A gust of wind roared in from the ocean nearly knocking me down again. Lunging forward, I shoved my hair out of my eyes and grabbed his hand. He shook me off but I linked my fingers in his and refused to let him go. Now that my brain was settling down from its near-death experience, I was able to put together coherent thoughts and wished I couldn’t. Like a bad dream, tonight’s events came drifting back to me.

We hadn’t ended up here on a whim. We were here for safe haven. Ireland was home.

Devastated by Dec’s death, Sean had teleported out of the underground tunnels in Brooklyn. Knowing Sean was close to collapsing, Killian had thrown me against him just before he vanished. He wanted me to anchor Sean, keep him from going, but it hadn’t worked out that way. Startled, Sean grabbed me out of reflex and we’d tumbled end over end through the void of time and space until my disastrous reentry in the Atlantic Ocean.

“Where are we going?” I swiveled around but didn’t see any lights from a town or even a tiny village anywhere.

The overcast light revealed an empty wild land covered with stubby grass and clumps of grey heather. The coast was dotted with craggy black rock with tiny patches of sand peeking through. Looking at the rocks with respect, I gingerly touched the lump on my temple. It had swollen to the size of an ostrich egg and was dripping blood down my neck.

“Sean, I’m dripping like a faucet here. Can we stop for a minute? I need to do something with this cut.” My free hand was slippery with fresh blood but wasn’t doing a good job of stopping the flow. I needed a bandage, or better yet, time to heal myself properly.

Seeming to notice me for the first time, he blinked at me in surprise. Surprise turned to annoyance and then irritation. There’s the Sean I know and love...He grunted something intelligible and lifted my hair. Wincing at his roughness, I set my jaw and let him poke and prod.

“We’re almost there,” he said, pulling off his own bloody t-shirt. After wadding it into a ball, he pushed it into my hands. “That’s my only shirt. I expect you to wash it and give it back if you don’t die.”

“Nice.” I shoved the balled up cotton against the cut and pressed. Oh, sure, I’d wash it...jerk.

His eyes swiveled sharply to mine and I caught my breath. Brilliantly blue and intense on a good day, they were nearly black and emotionless now. Flat and cold...and lost. The dim light cast eerie shadows across his cheekbones, making him somehow harder, more dangerous, feral.

“Don’t push me, Mica. You won’t like where it takes me.” His eyes traveled over my face and lingered on my mouth.

Nervously, I licked my lips and looked away. What was he thinking? Once upon a time, I knew. Now, his face was blank, giving nothing away.

After another mile or so of stumbling across the grass, we stopped near the base of a small hill. It was more of a rise in elevation than a real hill. Sean stared at the top of it searching for something. I scanned the hillside for warm bodies...animals, people, demons...

We trudged around the base until we came to a tiny indentation in the grass that zigzagged up the side of the hill. Sean took off up the trail with me on his heels. Killian’s words still echoed in my head and I didn’t trust Sean not to leave me here and disappear without a trace. He’d been on edge before tonight--angry and frustrated with me and with himself. Killian was worried about him already, but then the fight in the tunnels...

Tonight had been a disaster.

It was all I could do to block the memories. I swallowed the lump in my throat and sniffed hard. There would be time to grieve later. Right now, I needed to keep Sean from losing himself completely. For once, *I* was protecting *him*. I guess it’s my turn. We reached the top and he mechanically took my hand and yanked me over a ragged lip of tumbled dirt. Not paying attention to his strength, he pulled so hard I practically flew over the other side. Landing on my knees, I glared at him, but his mind was a million miles away again and he’d acted automatically without seeing me.

“Oh! What is that?” I asked.

“Shelter. Come on. Let’s see if the roof is still there.”

The stone hut was more substantial than the collapsed rock walls of Killian’s temple on Eden, but it was probably as ancient. It had been dug into the hillside so had a natural roof of earth. It didn’t look too safe to me though...I hung back just outside and waved Sean ahead of me. It was like a passage tomb. Being buried alive was my deepest, darkest fear. I really, really didn’t want to go inside. He kept walking though. Sighing mentally, I focused my power to the palm of my hand until it lit up like a flashlight. Blinking spastically, it gave me a little comfort in the overwhelming blackness. Jumping at the sudden burst of light, Sean whirled and nearly blew me up.

“Whoa! It’s just me! Don’t shoot!” I wiggled my hand. “Look, it’s a new trick I learned from Killian.”

Frozen at the sound of my voice, a fine thread of energy hovered just on the edge of his fingertips. It collapsed onto itself into a tiny ball of light. His energy core, or *saol*, had its own intelligence and retreated from hurting me because it was intimately tied to my own; it wouldn’t hurt me. Not as long as he was Primani. A wink of blue caught my eye, but was soon hidden by the dark again.

Lowering his hand, he studied me for a minute and said, “Useful trick. Are you coming in or do you plan to stand there shaking like a chick? It’d be more helpful if I could see the back of the room.”

Against my better judgment, I left the dubious safety of the doorway and met him in the back of the room. Taking my hand, he raised it over my head to illuminate the ceiling. Mushrooms

grew here and there giving it a weird warty appearance. Other than that, it seemed sturdy enough. It smelled damp and musty though and Sean sneezed. After the third sneeze, I stifled a small grin. Who knew Primani could have allergies? A small stone brazier sat in one corner with an ancient chunk of wood sitting in it. It looked petrified to me, but Sean didn't notice. He moved the brazier away from the wall and used his hand to light the log. The log caught a spark and soon glowed with a cheery golden flame. The floor was dirt and there were no other supplies. Great. It was going to be a long, cold, dirty night.

I sat near the fire rubbing my hands. Soaking wet, I was shaking with cold and the cut on my head was aching. Now that we were sitting still, I noticed my fingers and toes were still numb and tingling. How long would that last? I had no idea. I wished Killian was here to ask; he'd know. I was pretty sure the tingling was left over from channeling lightning through my body when we fried the zombies. My hair smelled singed but it didn't feel burnt so I thought it was probably fine. I peered over at Sean from under my lashes. He stood tensely, shoulders slumped, his eyes staring at nothing. Sensing my attention, he huffed under his breath and rolled his shoulders.

Coming over to me, he squatted and said flatly, "Do you have enough energy to heal yourself *and* keep warm?"

"I'm not sure. I'm feeling a little hollow. I might need some help. Can you...would you help me?" I hesitated to ask given the mercurial mood he was in.

"I don't really have a choice, do I?"

"Ouch."

Impervious to the damp cold, he sat with his bare back against the wall and pointed to the dirt between his legs. I scooted over and leaned my back against his chest. The warmth was immediate and heavenly. With his arms wrapped carelessly around me, he shared his heat while staring off into space. Gradually my shivering stopped and I took a deep breath and relaxed against him completely. His heat swirled through my skin like sunlight and I closed my eyes in relief and focused on healing myself. As my *saol* flowed under my skin, I let myself drift, let it take over. It thrummed through my veins bringing strength and heat to every part of me. Drawing it to the gash on my head, I slowly surrounded the torn skin and bruised muscle and felt them knit back together. It flowed smoothly through me as it healed the tiny wounds, warming me from the inside out.

"You should take off your wet clothes," he said in a practical tone.

"That's *so* not going to happen."

Uncaring, he shrugged, "It's your life. Don't blame me if you get pneumonia." He pulled his arms away and crossed them against his chest. Closing his eyes, he added, "Don't forget about my shirt."

Emotionally and physically drained, I turned away from him and curled up in a ball in front of the weak fire. I was as close as possible without lying on top of it. I was still cold but there were worse things. I could be dead, for real this time. Like Dec...the memory of Dec's pure golden soul swirling into the air struck me hard and my throat tightened so I could barely breathe.

Beautiful, sweet Declan...my healer, my brother, my friend.

How is he gone? How is that even possible? It was like waking up to find the sky suddenly green and the grass blue.

It seemed like a bad dream...

Crazy with rage, he'd launched himself at Jordan. And Jordan had killed him.

Abruptly. Effortlessly. Coldly.

When I closed my eyes, I could still hear the echoes of breaking bone. Jordan had stunned us with his smug little victory speech. No one had known how strong he was, how powerful. Although he wasn't Primani, he had angelic powers. But no one knew he had familial powers. He'd kept his family's magic a secret from everyone. Like Killian, his powers were his by birthright. He'd grown stronger with the help of *Sgaine Dutre*.

And then there was Satan.

Satan had granted him more power as part of a deal they made. Jordan had been an angel once. Now...he was fallen.

Fallen and taken my friend with him.

Damn you, Jordan! How could you kill him? How could you be so evil? Dec was just a baby!

The dam finally broke and I let myself feel the agony I'd been holding inside for hours. The pain was impossibly sharp as it carried me to a darker place. My fist shook with the urge to hit something. My blood raced through me as I lay there helpless to save Dec. The tears weren't cleansing; they were fuel for the anger simmering below the surface. More than anything, I wanted to rip Jordan's face off and bury him in the darkest pit in Hell. I wanted to hurt him like he hurt Dec. But even that wouldn't bring Dec back. Nothing I could do would bring Dec back. Killing Jordan wasn't the answer to my pain. What I needed was Dec. I needed to know he wasn't really gone. I wanted to search for him, go to Heaven and reassure myself he was there. I needed to know he was okay, somewhere...Where did Primani go when they died? Did they go to Heaven? Lying stiff with cold, I thought about Dec and cried without a sound. My throat threatened to strangle me from the pain of holding back the keening wail that was trying to break out of me. I wanted to howl like a banshee, but I choked it back, shaking and trembling alone. I wanted comfort but there was none in this cave. Sean was a million miles from me, lost in his thoughts, his memories...unreachable.

Don't go too far, my angel...

Shivering in the darkness, I tossed and turned, not sleeping. I was cold and uncomfortable and dirty. My stomach was in a knot and I wanted Killian's strength to steady me. I wanted his arms around me so I could let my human weakness take over for just a minute. But he was too far away. He was chasing Jordan across some other dimension and he couldn't stop for me now. He'd find him. And hopefully rip him to shreds with a fork. If anyone could find Jordan, it was Killian. If anyone could destroy Jordan, it was Killian. I wished I could be there to watch. Frustrated, I pushed myself up and stalked outside into the paleness of dawn.

"I'm taking you back to the farmhouse." He'd slipped up behind me and stood just out of reach. His voice sounded strained as if he was holding himself together by sheer will. He was trying to be civilized, but he really just wanted me gone so he could be alone.

Turning, I said, "Killian wouldn't like that. I have orders."

"Like I care what Killian would like? He doesn't control me. I don't want you here," he snarled at me with bared teeth.

So much for civilized. "Maybe not, but I'm staying until we figure things out."

"No, you're not." He reached out to grab me and I blocked his hand and pivoted to one side.

I crouched and waited for his next move. Eyeing me carefully, he edged to my left and took a step forward. Anticipating his feint, I moved farther to the left and tripped him when he lunged to my right. He thought he was clever...Springing back to his feet, he glared at me beneath lowered lashes, his eyes just beginning to burn. Oh, so it's like that, is it?

Going all *supernatural* on me?

My own anger caught and I felt the heat build inside of me. My vision went white when he tensed to travel, and I threw myself at his waist, pulling him back from his attempted flight. Crashing hard, we both lost our breath as we hit the ground. Grabbing me around the waist, he tried to throw me to one side but couldn't budge me. Still trying to anchor him, I held him in a death grip until he growled at me.

"Jesus, you're like a friggin' leech!" He squirmed underneath me and sneered, "Are you going to get off me or should I reach for a condom?"

Surprised, I laughed, "Oh, very funny! I'm not getting off until you tell me what's going on in your head. Like it or not, we're stuck with each other for now."

He hissed in frustration and looked around like a trapped animal. Just for a second, his eyes were unguarded, and I caught a glimpse of the pain and confusion that roiled inside of his head.

"I don't want to talk about it. Period. So stop wasting your time."

Leaning my forehead against his chest, I counted to ten before I responded. "Okay, fine. Can I talk then?"

Dumping me rudely onto the grass, he said, "No. I don't want to hear you talk either." Standing up, he looked out across the countryside and ignored me again.

He finally turned to me and said, "Listen, I'm not in a good position. I don't want you with me, but Killian's off the grid or I'd bring you to him. And Dec...God, Dec." His voice caught and he clamped his lips together.

My own throat tightened in response to his pain. He was sending off waves of it right now and my enhanced empathy gladly gathered it all up and processed it for him. Between the two of us, my head was about to explode.

Laying my hand on his arm, I tried reasoning with him. "I'm not trying to be difficult. But you can't leave me alone. I've got a target on my back, you know that." I paused and added, "Unless that's what you want?"

Sucking in his breath, he snapped, "Don't be stupid! You know I don't want you dead. That's not even in my nature." He glared pointedly at my hand and I moved it.

"Yeah, well, it wasn't supposed to be in James' or Jordan's nature either. You'll forgive me if I don't believe you?"

"Touché." He touched his forehead lightly with two fingers. His smile didn't reach his eyes.

The sun was fully up and glowing brightly against the eastern horizon. It should've stayed down though. Sean was still shirtless and his torso was liberally smeared with dirt from the hut. His pants were filthy from struggling with Dagin in the tunnels and sitting in wet dirt all night. He desperately needed to shave and his face, neck, and forearms were splattered with dried blood that hadn't come off in the ocean. Apparently, I was the only one who landed in the water. His nose and left eye were swollen and he had a huge blue bruise from his temple to his chin on the left side of his face. Both hands were scabbed and there were long, jagged claw marks across his forearm.

"You don't look much better, so stop staring at me," he commented shortly. "You're filthy and your hair's a disaster."

My stomach growled loudly, and I shoved my hand against it to quiet it down. Thinking back, I couldn't remember the last time I'd eaten anything. Two days ago? Did we eat before we went zombie hunting? My mind was blank on the subject. It had more important things to obsess over and I didn't have much of an appetite anyway. Sean didn't seem to be interested in food

either and I didn't want to disturb him. After snapping rudely at me earlier, he'd turned and left me standing alone. Dismissing me completely, he went back to the hut and retrieved his disgusting shirt and put it on. It was so stiff it actually crackled when he dragged it over his head. I watched him like a hawk as he peered around the tiny room. I still didn't trust him but I thought he'd keep his word and not leave me stranded here. How many times had he sworn he'd never hurt me? He'd blown those promises to Hell and back, but I had to believe he still loved me someplace deep inside his soul. He might be slipping towards the dark, but he wasn't there yet. I had a claim on him that he couldn't ignore and I was going to exploit it if that's what it took to keep Sean on the right path. I chewed my lip and wished for help. Killian would be able to reach him.

"Let's go," he barked abruptly to my right.

Startled out of my reverie, I jumped with my hand to my heart. "Where to?"

"Safe house." Without waiting for my reply, he gripped both of my shoulders and the hut disappeared into oblivion.

The feeling of a pressure change was the only sensation I felt when we teleported. Normally controlled and natural, traveling this way was familiar for the Primani. They did it all the time, like it was part of their benefits package...perfect teeth dental, self-healing medical, unlimited 401k, free teleporting, ability to kill demons, etc., etc. It wasn't natural to me yet, but I'd done it enough now that I wasn't surprised by it. Unless of course, we're tumbling out of control and Sean throws me out in front of him like he did yesterday. That little experience was unusual and I didn't like it. God only knew where I could end up next time.

My feet settled lightly on firm ground this time and Sean held me steady for an extra few seconds. His irises were glowing softly above the purple shadows under his eyes. His cheekbones were white with exhaustion and grief but he hid it well. The tension in his hands gave it away. His fingers were digging into my biceps hard enough to leave bruises, but I didn't have the heart to point out that he was hurting me. I'd live. The waves of pain rolling off of him were making me queasy and I tried to send soothing vibes in his direction. Scowling deeply, he peered at something behind my back and clamped his teeth together in resignation.

"Come on, let's get moving." With that, he walked past me so quickly I had to sprint to catch up.

Apparently, our destination was an old stone farmhouse squatting in the middle of a grove of ancient trees. The huge trees surrounded the house and shielded it from prying eyes and poor weather. The two-story house was made from sun-bleached cut stone. It had a large overgrown garden in the front with a small covered porch standing guard. Climbing roses scaled one side of the house and wild flowers rioted across the sunny patches of the yard. The property was bordered by ancient black and grey stone fences that zigzagged drunkenly around the perimeter. It seemed to be several acres and was isolated on this sweeping plain. There wasn't another building in sight. It was beautiful, but desperately lonely. Was the house abandoned? Who lived here? Sean? If so, in what century?

Was it my imagination or did the shuttered windows perk up at the sight of him? The closer we got, the brighter the house appeared; its vibes went from depressed to joyful. It seemed to welcome us. My imagination was in overdrive today. Are those bells ringing? No, wait, it's not my imagination. I do hear bells ringing! Stopping in the middle of the overgrown stone walkway, I gazed around in amazement. The garden was overflowing with flowers, and butterflies flitted industriously from bloom to bloom. I buried my nose in a purple flower and smiled hesitantly at Sean. His face was a blank mask as he faced the front door like it was a firing squad.

Tucking the bloom behind my ear, I asked softly, “Is this place safe? It seems *alive*...”

Instead of answering me, he turned and lowered his face to mine. My pulse jumped automatically, but he didn’t kiss me. Instead, he inhaled the delicate fragrance of the flower and drew back with a wistful sigh.

“That was my mother’s favorite too. I guess you two have something in common.”

Unable to resist, I held his fingers against my cheek and said, “Besides loving you, Sean O’Cahan?”

His eyes brightened for just an instant and flattened out nearly as fast. Giving my hand a squeeze, he didn’t comment but headed for the door. It had a large deadbolt lock on it and a tiny red LED light glowed unobtrusively in the corner above the door. Hmm, it had modern security equipment. That’s interesting. Hopefully that meant the house had running water (correction; *hot* running water). At this point, my nose was trying to lean away from my body. Sea water, blood, mud, sand, sweat...I *really* needed a shower.

The inside of the house was a nice surprise. The floors were dark wood with thick wool carpets covering the main areas. The bottom floor had a living room with a flat screen TV and overstuffed leather couches. The small dining room contained a simple wooden table and six maroon leather chairs. A pewter chandelier hung over the table, but other than that the dining room was empty of any decorations. The walls were bare in all of the rooms except for a large wood-framed mirror in the entrance by the front door. Just like our farmhouse in New York, there were no curtains or useless knickknacks. It was simply furnished for function and not for style.

The tiny kitchen had been upgraded with a new refrigerator and stove, but nothing special had been done to the room. I couldn’t resist getting on my tiptoes to look through the window above the sink. It overlooked part of the rear garden and my mouth dropped open in surprise.

“The garden is beautiful back here. Can we go outside later?”

Blankly, he said, “You can go anywhere on the property. Just don’t wander off after dark.”

His expression told me he was thinking of something else again and I watched him for signs of departure. Was he going to bolt? He seemed stable enough...but starting to weaken. I studied him carefully as he stared out the window over my head. He was exhausted; he hadn’t eaten, he wasn’t sleeping, and he was forcing himself to be strong. I knew he was dying inside over Dec. He was his closest friend, his partner in crime. He considered him his little brother. They were soldiers together and had each other’s backs.

I felt the same crushing sense of loss, but he was holding it back and closing his armor against it. His physical body needed rest and food. His brain needed to shut down and process everything within the safety of sleep. I wasn’t sure how long he could use his Primani *saol* to fuel himself without food and rest. At some point, the effort would be too much and he’d probably collapse. If that happened, well, I don’t know how I would help him.

“Sean, I--”

“Mica, don’t,” his voice was strained and he rubbed his eyes, “just don’t.”

Taking his hand, with a sense of *déjà vu*, I asked him to show me the bedrooms and a shower. We headed up the short flight of stairs and he opened one of the four wooden doors for me. Inside was a girly bedroom with a queen-sized bed covered with a fluffy white comforter. The walls were painted lavender and one was papered with a mural of a lavender field. It was sweet. Two large windows and a tiny balcony opened up to a view of the flower-covered plain.

“Where’s your room?”

He pointed to the room farthest away from mine and I frowned. That's not close enough. "Can't you sleep in this one?" I pointed to the one next to mine. "I don't want to be so alone. I have nightmares."

His attention snapped back and he scrutinized me with suspicion. "Nightmares? What nightmares?"

Letting the silence stretch, I fiddled with my locket. Finally, I said, "How can you ask that? Didn't you hear anything that Jordan said? I was trapped in that house for hours listening to a thousand demons screaming, trying to get inside. Pounding and scratching and screaming..." My voice drifted off and I shuddered at the memory. "When they finally broke the protection, they ripped the house into pieces trying to get to me. They tore the windows apart, the doors into splinters...I was about to shove *your* knife into my heart when Raphael chased them off. One more second and I would've been dead either way. And then the hospital..." I bit my lip as I remembered the demons and the loss that they caused. My heart still hadn't moved on even if my brain was busy.

Frozen in place, he stared at me, eyes dark and emotionless. A tiny flame flickered in their depths. Finally, I turned and walked away.

"Sean! Wake up! You're dreaming!" I reached out to shake him but hesitated.

What if he was too far gone to recognize me? He could hurt me without even knowing it happened. Instead, I let my hand linger just next to him and waited. Gentle heat radiated from his skin and I craved the comfort of it. It was late now and I'd been tossing and turning with bad dreams of my own. A sound had startled me awake a few minutes ago and I'd sat straight up in my bed, listening and alert. The sound came again and my heart contracted in sympathy. The cry of distress was barely audible but it was there. I'd sat and wondered what to do while he flailed in the grip of his nightmare. After endless minutes, I'd slipped into his room and tried to wake him.

The moonlight was weak and hardly penetrated the darkness. Sean lay sprawled on his stomach with one arm flung out in front of him. The sheet was wrapped around his waist in a tangle of white. I knew without looking that he was naked under it. The taut muscles of his back shimmered faintly against the shadows, and I wanted badly to reach out and touch him, to pull him out of the dream. He groaned and shifted his body, tensing for a fight. His fist clenched once, twice, and then opened into a claw that raked the bed as if desperate to hold on to something. Suddenly his eyes flew open and stared without seeing me. He gasped and said just one word. Then he abruptly moaned and flung out the clawed hand. It struck me on my leg and didn't shock me, so I took that as an invitation and gingerly perched on the edge of the bed and laid my hand on his arm to wake him. Instead of waking up, he curled his fingers around mine and pulled me down to him. Completely asleep, he curled around my back and rested his face against my hair. His breathing softened and he found peace again.

I, on the other hand, was not at peace. It was the middle of the night and somehow I had ended up in bed with Sean...how on earth was I going to explain this in this morning? Lying stiff as a board, I agonized over getting up. I finally tried to slip away. He responded by pulling me closer and mumbling something against my hair. His arm was draped over my waist, his hand lying upturned in supplication in front of me. His beautiful fingers were curled into a claw again. I wrapped my hand around his and they relaxed into softness. Oh, Sean...what's going to happen to you? Against my better judgment, I relaxed against him and tried not to picture the frown on Killian's face. He would *not* like this...

“What the hell?” Sean’s startled exclamation woke me out of a fitful sleep as the sun slanted into the curtains.

I jumped up and looked around for intruders, my hand automatically reaching for a weapon. Finding neither, I stood blinking like an owl in my underwear.

“What are you doing in my bed?” we both demanded at the same time.

Narrowing his eyes at me, he peered underneath the sheet and eyeballed my half-naked body with confusion on his face. Uncomfortably aware of how much skin was showing, I yanked the abandoned quilt around me and stared back at him.

I swallowed and said lamely, “You had a bad dream. I, uh, wanted to help.”

He raised an eyebrow and his eyes turned that shade of midnight that told me exactly which head he was thinking with. The sheet twitched in invitation. “If you keep starin’ at me like that, darlin’, I’m going to pull you back under here and let you comfort me until noon.”

Yikes! Beating a hasty retreat, I practically sprinted to my own room and locked the door. Feeling like I just dodged a bullet, I closed my eyes with relief. Well, *that* could’ve been worse. I took a shower and tiptoed back to my room lest he catch me in my towel. Dashing into my room, I slammed the door shut behind me and leaned against it with my heart in my ears.

“Hiding, Princess?”

My eyes flew open. “Killian! Oh, my God, it’s you!” I threw myself against him and kissed him like he was water in a desert.

He held me close and smiled against my mouth. “Of course it’s me. I told you I’d find you. Are you okay?”

“Mostly...sort of...okay, not really. But I’m better now.”

Taking advantage of my lack of clothes, he tugged on the towel and let it settle around my feet. With supernatural thoroughness, he ran his hands over every inch of my skin, taking inventory of my bruises. His calloused fingers were magical even without his powers and I was sinking into oblivion when he stopped touching me and rested his fingers lightly against my arm. He asked, “Who did this?”

“Hmm?”

“Seriously, babe. Where did you get these bruises? They’re fingerprints.”

I blinked and sighed. So much for comforting me...

Chuckling in spite of his worry, he said, “Oh, don’t worry, there’s time for that.” His eyes returned to my arm and he added, “But, first things first.”

He was looking at my left arm. I said, “Those are from Sean, and the others are from you.” I had an angry-looking bruise on my right arm from where he’d grabbed me in panic just before he’d vanished from the tunnels.

He immediately looked contrite so I rushed to add, “It’s not your fault! It happened in the tunnels. It doesn’t hurt; it just looks ugly.”

I traced his jaw with my fingertip and nibbled on his frowning mouth until he cracked a tiny smile. I grinned in satisfaction as my finger left a tiny trail of light across his skin. Smiling into my eyes, he reached out and stroked my cheek with the back of his hand. The rune brought a rush of heat to my skin, and my twin glowed cheerily at the contact. The twin runes connected us in ways that even Killian hadn’t expected. His blood flowed through my body like it did his own. The more I used my new powers, the more connected I felt to him. Being apart left me feeling antsy and incomplete. Standing at his side, touching him, swamped me with a strange sense of déjà vu, of fulfilled destiny, of ancient history.

“Come here, love. Let me take away your pain,” he ordered in that soft sexy voice of his.

Leaning his forehead against mine, he gathered me against him and held me in the silence of the morning. We stood together just breathing until the grief and pain drifted away. My heart was lighter and my mind clearer. He had that effect on me. One of my dubiously helpful powers was the ability to sense others’ emotions, and Killian’s mind was more open to me than most. My newly-cleared mind allowed me to focus on him. His emotions swirled around like a snowstorm. He was worried for the people he loved. I squeezed him harder against me and tried to absorb some of his strain. He had many faces...protector, lover, Primani. His unique powers made him too strong to really need love or comfort, but he was willing to accept it from me as a bonus in his lonely life. Until I came along, he’d existed quite nicely without affection or tenderness. His status as a 3,000-year old warrior-priest-angel allowed him to rise above silly little human notions like romantic love. Even knowing that, I was still compelled to take away his pain.

Scooping me into his arms, he wagged his head, “Do you ever stop thinking? You’re making me dizzy.”

Flushing, I said, “Sorry, I forget you can read my mind. It must be so boring for you.”

Plopping me on the mattress, he nibbled on my neck and mumbled, “Shh, I’m still comforting you.”

Following a clink of weapons, his clothes hit the floor and he sprawled out in all of his sexy, naked, glory. His big body reclined next to me and I shook my head in amazement. I slowly ran my hands over the hard ridges of his abs. The muscles quivered at my touch as I ran my fingertip around his belly button. It was a perfect innie with a tiny freckle centered underneath it. Intrigued, I pressed my nail into the freckle, just to watch it fade and reappear. He twitched and trapped my hand with one of his big paws. He was entirely too perfect; and he was all mine. Suddenly feeling greedy, I slid my hand lower and arched against him like a cat. His reaction was immediate. Afterwards, I was so comfortable I might’ve been dead.

“You’re leaving, aren’t you?” I stretched and tucked my chin into the crook of his arm.

Yawning, he said, “Yes, I have to go. I have a lead on Jordan and I need to be in Lucerne today. I needed to see you though. I wanted to be sure you were okay.”

Curling into his side, I nodded against his chest. “I think I am, but I feel weaker than I did before. It’s like I’m a little shaky inside and my skin feels...thin.”

Frowning slightly, he tucked me against him and thought for a minute. “Working with lightning is hard core. It’s tough to control and can really mess you up if you don’t do it right.” He smiled at me then, a cheeky, mischievous grin that transformed his entire face. “You were amazing, you know that, right? Other than me, there isn’t anyone else alive today who can control lightning. You’re bad ass, babe.”

Flabbergasted, I sat up, turning pink at the unexpected compliment. “Really? I had no idea. So it’s true then, we...” I didn’t need to finish my thought. He’d know what I meant.

“Yes, we really did control it. It took both of us to do it. I couldn’t have done it without you on that big a scale. Now you see why I needed to check on you? I wanted to be sure you weren’t lying in a puddle of drool with a brain like a zucchini.” He ran a slow hand over my hip and leaned down to kiss me again. His calloused palm drifted over my breast to rest on my heart. The tip of his tongue teased my mouth and he said, “I can feel your heart beating for me, slow and steady. Is that how you want me now?”

“Killian?”

“Hmm?” His breath came evenly across the top of my head as we lay sprawled on the bed.

“What’s happening with Sean? I’m not sure how to reach him. He won’t talk to me.”

Rolling smoothly to his feet, Killian slipped on his clothes and went to stand near the window. His scowl deepened the tiny creases between his eyes, making him seem older and tired. Without turning, he said regretfully, “He’s not going to talk to you. You know that. He’s too proud and it’s not his way. You’re going to have to be patient and look for an opening.”

“But what’s going on with him? I totally get that he’s trying to deal with what happened to Dec.” My voice hitched and I coughed to cover the rush of emotion. “But what are you so worried about?”

“Come here with me and I’ll tell you what I think. Maybe you’ll have another opinion. If you do, I’ll be glad to hear it. This is one time I wish I was wrong.” He patted the window seat and smiled sadly. I sat cross-legged in front of him and linked my fingers loosely in his.

His eyes clouded with memory while he gathered his thoughts. Finally, he said, “I think you already know how strongly connected our emotions are to our powers. You’ve seen that in your own powers. It’s rarely a problem for Primani though. We don’t normally feel extreme swings of negative emotions like rage, fear, or even sadness.” He shrugged and added, “It’s not that we can’t; we just don’t. It isn’t usually necessary. We don’t get emotionally involved with our charges and we rarely lose other Primani. James and Jordan are anomalies. Primani don’t fall but once in a thousand years.”

“So, if you don’t feel too much, you never have to feel the pain of someone’s death?”

“Exactly. Most of us haven’t lost someone we care about for thousands of years. You know we have feelings, but we’re warriors before anything else. If we have to choose between our mission and our personal feelings, we’ll choose the mission. It’s how we’re made.” He squeezed my fingers and I took the hint.

Nodding, I said, “And you think Sean’s letting his anger take control? Do you think he’ll be so pissed off that he’ll fall? I can’t believe that.”

“Not that simple, babe. He’s still Primani and he’ll never willingly give that up.” He tapped his temple. “But up here? He’s all screwed up right now. He was already struggling with things before what happened in the tunnels.”

“Dec?”

Sighing with uncharacteristic emotion, he lowered his voice. “Yeah, Dec. They were tight. Dec was his...*our* balance. He reminded us that we were really here to help humans, not just to slaughter demons. We tend to forget that sometimes. It’s easier to ignore the messiness of mankind than to deal with it. But Dec never let us forget that humans were our number one priority. I think he missed being human...Anyhow, Dec and Sean were like brothers. They’d already been through a lot together before we met you. When Dec died, the humanity in Sean went with him.”

“He’s in so much pain. I feel it...like a force that surrounds him. I *feel* it too and it’s breaking my heart.”

Killian’s eyes were troubled. The shifting blue irises seemed to separate into tiny layers of color as I watched. He blinked and said, “Sean’s keeping a secret and it’s eating him alive. That’s bad enough. Add James’ and Jordan’s betrayals to the mix, then top it off with Dec...Sean’s had a bad year.”

And then there’s us; I didn’t dare say the words out loud. It would be like an admission of guilt. So I said, “True. But Killian, I can’t believe he’d ever fall. He’s stronger than that!”

He shook his head at my innocence. "I know him better than you do. This has been building for decades. His feelings aren't unique, you know. Primani live a long time and many go through a sort of identity crisis. We work it out though. The problem with Sean is he's got enough power to take out half of Ireland by himself. He's walking a tightrope and any little thing could tip the balance. Jordan is out there just waiting for the right moment. If Sean crosses the line, it'll be over in the blink of an eye. We'll lose him."

Forever.

I thought that over and eventually said, "What do you want me to do?"

He pulled me closer and said, "Whatever it takes, babe; whatever it takes."