

THE GUARDIANS OF TIME



MARIANNE
CURLEY

BLOOMSBURY

the Dark

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BLOOMSBURY

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By the Same Author

*Dedicated to the memory of the late Tony Williams,
my agent for six years,
who never stopped believing in me*

*Before the world can be free
A bloom of murdered innocence shall be seen
In the woods above the ancient city of Veridian
Where nine identities shall be revealed*

*It will come to pass that a king shall rule
But not before a leader pure of heart awakens
And an ageless warrior with an ancient soul
Shall guide with grace and providence*

*Beware, nine shall see a traitor come and go
From whence a long and bitter war will follow
And the Named shall join in unity
Yet suspicion will cause disharmony*

*A jester shall protect, a doubter cast a shadow
And a brave young warrior will lose his heart to death
Yet none shall be victorious until a lost warrior returns
And the fearless one emerges from a journey led by light and strength*

*Take heed, two last warriors shall cause grief as much as good
From the midst of suspicion one shall come forth
The other seeded of evil
Yet one shall be victorious while the other victorious in death*

Prologue

She screams. And her scream is heard from one end of the universe to the other. The words, 'They will suffer,' are wrenched from between purple lips. Lathenia, the Goddess of Chaos, stares through her sphere to the past. A sphere she uses to create enough chaos to alter the present and produce a future that will have the world at her feet.

As she watches, a young soldier of the Guard pierces her lover's throat with his dagger for the second time. She screams again. How can her soldiers stand by and allow the only man she has ever loved to die? *'How!'*

Lathenia claws at the crystal with unnaturally-long fingers, leaving permanent indents. Finally, her body shudders, in time with her love's last breath.

Silence fills the chamber. In slow motion her head lifts and scours the marble walls. Her silver eyes flash the colour of fire. *'They will suffer!'*

A shrunken man, elderly, with eyes that have seen far, and for too long, approaches carefully from behind. 'Your Highness, might I have a word?'

Lathenia turns. Even in the midst of grief, her ethereal beauty cannot be concealed. 'What is this, Keziah? Can't you see what's happening down there? They have killed him. Such a cunning ploy, to tempt him with the image of his own daughter! It is Arkarian's plot. He is the mastermind of everything they do. He has tormented me for six hundred years too long!'

Keziah has seen his mistress angry before – many times – but this ... this seeming loss of control is new to him. He shivers. Grief and passion make a volatile mix.

'Tell me, Keziah, did Marduke not worship me? Why should the image of his daughter, a child he hasn't seen for twelve years, distract him? It was a trick! What caused his blindness?' Her eyes lower and she mutters, 'Perhaps he still loved the woman who bore her.'

Keziah shrugs and tilts his head, snow-white hair drapes across one elevated, bony shoulder. 'I know not, Highness, but now is not the time to doubt Marduke's loyalty. He proved many times in the twelve years that he was your most adoring servant. You must return his mortal body, and do so quickly. Remember, he is in the past.'

She nods. Red hair, like silk woven straight from a caterpillar's cocoon, drifts across her flawless skin. As she straightens to her full height, towering almost half a body length over Keziah's ageing limbs, her fingers clench into tight fists. Returning to the sphere, she summons Marduke.

Even before his lifeless body completely forms before her, the Goddess moves to the crystal table and throws herself across his massive chest. Blood, still oozing from the knife wound to his throat, touches her hand. She wails, her grief a tangible entity in the circular chamber.

Once again Keziah approaches, and having known the Goddess his entire lifetime, a mere fraction of hers, he timidly touches her shoulder.

'What is it!'

Keziah clears his dry and withered throat, 'The others, Highness.'

Lathenia pierces him with blazing eyes. Keziah's heart misses two beats in a row. 'The injured Mistress. We can't let them die in the past, for they could all be healed in our chambers and be of use to you again. They are your soldiers and loyal to the cause.'

She nods, and Keziah's lungs exhale. Returning to the sphere, she waves her hand over the crystal

The room fills with the sound of moaning, the heat of mortal flesh, the scent of sweat and blood as the Goddess's soldiers materialise. One of them, a young man, approaches. He stops mid stride at the look in his Goddess's eyes. It is a look of such distress, he feels that to continue holding her gaze would be a physical intrusion. He bows his head deeply, 'Your Highness, what should we do with the injured?'

She flicks her hand at him. 'Have you no sense, Bastian? Organise those still standing to carry the injured to the healing chambers.'

Bastian flicks an uncomfortable glance at the two lifeless bodies amongst them. 'What about the dead?' he whispers.

'Leave them. Their souls are already wandering the middle realm.'

Bastian cringes at the thought. Though he knows little of this place called the middle realm, he knows it is another world entirely. Once, he thought there was only earth. He has learned a lot in his time with the Order. More than he could ever have learned if he had chosen to remain unenlightened.

As Bastian organises the removal of the injured, he realises one soldier is missing.

'She has turned traitor.' Lathenia verbalises his suspicions. 'She will die.'

'I'll find her.'

'Forget her for now. The Guard will protect her and keep her hidden for a long time. But your chance will come.'

With the last of the injured removed, Bastian makes for the door, but Lathenia calls him back. 'Stay, I must talk with you.'

Bastian inhales a deep breath, his hands clasped tightly before him. They're shaking and he doesn't want his Goddess to see this weakness. He has never seen her so distraught before. Losing Marduk appears to have destabilised her. Although familiar with her usual violent temper, her added distress brings a stab of terror to his heart. But what could he have done to stop that blade from repeatedly slashing the master's throat? It was as ugly as it was incisive. It was also skilful. 'Yes, Highness?'

'Tell me what happened.'

Green eyes widen for an instant, then flick briefly around the smooth white walls, and he swallows. Surely she must already know, having seen everything through her sphere, or why would Marduk's body be lying before her now on that narrow crystal table?

At his hesitation Lathenia screams her words from across the room, 'Tell me how the best of mortal soldiers can be defeated by so few of theirs! Tell me, Bastian, the name of the one whose hand held the lethal dagger!'

'He ... he appeared young, Highness.'

'You are forgetting that while in the past, all are disguised.'

'Yes, but ... his eyes. There was something about his eyes. And well, as you know, eyes don't change—'

She cuts him off with a wave of her hand. Of course she knows how it works. Wasn't she the one who started it all? Conceived first, she should have been born first! Sharing the womb with Lorian had been difficult from the start. He continually manipulated her position until her life-cord became wrapped around her neck. But even this inconvenience couldn't stop her from claiming her rightful first position. Except Lorian shoved her to the rear at the very moment of birth, forcing his way past her into the loving arms of a very proud father. So she'd had to find a way to overcome the obstacle of being born second. She spent centuries figuring out a way to cause enough chaos to disrupt her brother's ministrations. She learned that chaos gave her power. She found it by tampering with the past. And the stronger she became, the more she understood anything was possible, including tot

domination of all the worlds.

She started gathering an army of similar-minded followers, and built a time-shift labyrinth with bricks that could not be seen by human eyes. She called her army the Order. Others called it the Order of Chaos. But as her powers surged, so did that of her opponents. Assembling a Tribunal with Lorian at its head, they formed a guard against her. Whenever her soldiers used the labyrinth to venture into the past, so did the soldiers of the Guard, causing her to fail many times. Needing a sanctuary that could be safe from both mortal and immortal hands, she started constructing a city. But Lorian revealed hidden powers to usurp her. He stole her ideas, her designs. The construction became the Citadel. Today, her soldiers only use the adjoining labyrinth, where time travellers from both alliances are endowed with the special knowledge needed before venturing on their journeys. Lorian controls the Citadel, but she wants it back! And this time she will fortify it so that no one, not even her powerful hungry brother, will steal it from her. And at last she will rule over all!

Lathenia's eyes linger on Bastian. She remembers how he came to be a part of her Order – a lonely child, living in poverty with parents constantly feuding. How he wanted to scream at *them* for change, instead of cowering beneath his makeshift bed or inside a narrow closet with his hands thrust tightly over both ears. Why couldn't he have a home like the other children at school? Why couldn't his parents stop screaming at each other? Why did they both drink so much? But most of all he wanted to control his world, and he wanted the pleasures that he sensed the world could give him.

He also had power. So she waited and watched. The day he ran off into the woods, tears of pain and hurt and frustration streaming down his face, she found him. It was his eighth birthday, the day his parents decided to separate. She offered him everything he dreamed of. And he accepted greedily. She gave him a new name and taught him many skills. And while he continued to live with his father, the man remained a drunkard and oblivious to his son's otherworldly life. And her victory was sweet, for here was one soldier her brother would not get his hands on.

As her thoughts return to the present, she notices Bastian's hands shaking, and wonders if she made a mistake. But no, he has been true to the Order from the day of his Initiation, eight years ago. It is why he is so highly ranked among her elite. But today ... *today*, he let her down. Without any warning she slaps his face. The force of it sends Bastian to the floor. 'You should have done more!'

He gets up. 'There was nothing—'

'There is never nothing—!'

Bastian thinks quickly. He glimpses Keziah. 'I think there was a wizard amongst them.'

This suggestion seizes her attention. 'What did you say?'

'A wizard, your Highness.'

'Explain.'

'The boy worked some sort of magic. He created an image of a girl. It distracted—'

She cuts him off with a wave of her hand, but her eyes narrow as she contemplates Bastian's theory. She soon dismisses it with a shake of her head. 'The closest the Guard have to a wizard today is a man called Arkarian. Watch out for him, Bastian, for he is their jewel. Without him, they are nothing. And while he is highly skilled, even *he* cannot perform magic. Keziah is the last of a dying breed. There was another who could perform magic once, but, threatened, Lorian disposed of him.'

'How will I know this "jewel", Highness?'

One finely arched eyebrow lifts. 'You will know Arkarian by his blue hair and violet eyes. Both are impossible to miss in the mortal world, should he have reason to surface. He lives in the Citadel now but his working chambers are somewhere around Veridian.'

‘What would you have me do to him when I find him?’

She laughs, a mocking sound, causing Bastian’s hands to start shaking again. ‘Do you think Arkarian will come knocking on your door? He has lived for six hundred years and gained many skills in that time, so do not underestimate his abilities. And do not be fooled by the number of years he has lived. He stopped ageing when he turned eighteen. Know this, Bastian, time has not affected Arkarian in any way except to change the colour of his hair and eyes. Even if he did reveal himself to you, you would fail miserably, just as you failed to save—’ She stops abruptly, caught by an idea that lifts her spirits as a plan for retaliation begins to form. ‘Wait.’ She stares at Bastian with the directness that makes his eyes flutter to the side. ‘Perhaps you *can* be of use, after all your miserable mistakes today.’

He bows his head deeply. ‘I’m at your mercy, Highness. Tell me what to do.’

She looks directly into the boy’s eyes: his whole body shudders. ‘Without revealing your allegiance, I want you to bring me the identity of one of the Named.’

‘The *Named*, Highness?’

‘Yes, and don’t look at me so blankly. The Named are the select group of nine members of the Guard. The elite branch of the Guardians of Time. An army originally formed to protect the earth from ... well, *me*.’ She gives a mocking laugh. ‘The Named, according to the Prophecy, are the soldiers who will go into battle against me. In the meantime it is their task to protect Veridian. One day they will have a king, but for now they have Arkarian.’

Lathenia gives Bastian a thoughtful look. ‘There are many branches of the Guardians of Time, each one headed by a member of their Tribunal. It is these Tribunal members who govern a sector of the earth using their own soldiers. Combined, they work as a council. But they are fools, Bastian, for Lorian makes all the decisions.’

He nods, understanding, and she says, ‘Why do you think so many of my soldiers and their commands come from that small town called Angel Falls?’

Bastian’s head shakes. ‘I don’t know.’

‘Because Angel Falls shelters Veridian, and Veridian is everything! It has power, Bastian. It was for a time the most powerful city in all the worlds, and so far advanced your earthly technology compared to nowhere near it, not even today.’

With difficulty Bastian meets his Goddess’s eyes. ‘Where is this city? Can I see it?’

‘The city is under the lake at Angel Falls. It is one more thing that Lorian keeps hidden from me. But one day – soon – I will find the way in, and its secrets will be mine.’

‘Is there something in particular you want from this city, Highness?’

Lathenia’s eyes flash at the young man. He is more astute than she realised. Perhaps his other power is finally starting to reveal itself. ‘There is a key, in the shape of an eight-sided pyramid. If you find it, Bastian, I would make you a king, and your realm would be immense. But heed my warning: the key has the power to kill any mortal that touches it.’

Bastian swallows deeply, his mind focused on the concept of becoming royalty. The idea of his own realm sparks visions of grandeur. And now that Marduke is ... well, gone, maybe his own talents will be more noticed. ‘It must be an important key, Highness. Does it open a chest of treasures?’

She scoffs at the boy’s naivety. ‘Perhaps one could call it that. But it’s not the sort of treasure that will bring you wealth, Bastian. It is a treasury of weapons. The finest and most powerful to be found in all the worlds.’

In the ensuing silence Lathenia’s eyes wander back across the room to the still body of her lover. One. Bastian watches as the Goddess’s hand, with her unusual fingers, splays across the blood-stained

chest of the Order's highest-ranked master. 'You must forget the key for now, Bastian. And forget Arkarian too. I will deal with him. You don't have the power. Not yet at least. And he is much more highly skilled than the average Guard. I have a plan for him that I will spin into action very soon. But I do have a mission for you. An important one.'

'I am nothing but your humble servant.'

'Bring me the name of the one whose hand held the dagger that stole Marduke's breath.' Spinning her head, Lathenia pins Bastian with ice-cold eyes, 'He may even attend your earthly school! Find him! Do you understand, Bastian?'

Bastian nods and takes a deep breath. 'Yes, Highness. I am to bring you the name of Marduke's murderer.'

Somewhat comforted by the very thought of revenge, Lathenia's attention returns to Marduke's slain body before her. A wave of grief grips her as she gently runs her fingers over the disfigured half of his face, the empty eye socket, the vacant side of his mouth, old scars from a previous battle with one of the Named. She kisses the cavities softly. 'The world will pay for this death. They will feel my grief. They will see my rage.'

'And so they should, Highness,' Keziah makes himself known once more.

She stares at the shrunken old man, seeing he has more to say.

'But perhaps, Mistress, for a small price ...' He makes a money motion with the fingers of his left hand, 'something can be done to ease your pain.'

Her shoulders lift, her chin rises. 'Speak, Keziah. For your life it had better be worth the words that flow from your shrivelled lips.'

He coughs into his cupped hand, his chest rattling and whistling. Catching his breath again he says, 'If you are prepared to make a journey in search of your beloved's soul—'

'I would do anything to save him. Explain yourself. And quickly, my patience is sorely tested these days.'

'The middle realm, Highness. The place Marduke's soul wanders, looking for a white bridge that will lead him to his final destiny.'

'Of course! He died within a mortal body while still in the past! If we reach him in time, Keziah, before he crosses that bridge ...' Her words drift away, but her meaning remains clear – there is a chance Marduke will live again. The very thought makes her immortal heart lurch.

'We will need your assistance to venture there, Highness. And perhaps your hounds could be of use to find him quickly.'

'I won't need my hounds to find him,' she dismisses. 'I would know him in any world.'

'There's just one more thing,' Keziah says, hesitating.

'Go on, old man! Hurry!'

'Your voice must be the one of his soul-mate, or he will not return.'

She smiles, and without answering, transports them into a grey and twisted forest, Bastian included, for the experience.

With the sudden drop in temperature, Bastian shivers. 'Are you sure Marduke's soul is in that place, Keziah?'

Keziah snorts as the Goddess moves on ahead, as if she were one of her own hounds drawn to the scent of an injured rabbit. 'Do you doubt me, Bastian?' Keziah replies.

'I just don't like it here. It's all so ...'

‘Dull?’

‘I was going to say colourless.’ His eyes shift up and around. ‘How far to the—’ He doesn’t finish his thought. Instead his eyes grow into huge orbs as they become fixed and staring. Suddenly he screams and throws both hands up to protect his face.

Keziah notices the boy’s distress. ‘Clear your thoughts!’ he instructs him. ‘Your fears will manifest into solid forms in this world.’

Slowly Bastian’s hands lower. When he looks this time, the snakes are gone, and he sighs with relief.

Keziah gives Bastian a closer examination. ‘You had better stay close. When we find Marduke, our return will be swift. You wouldn’t want to be left behind. I doubt the Goddess will come back for you.’

Bastian’s eyes widen and he rubs his arms to try and warm them. ‘I just hope we find Marduke soon.’ He pulls down a twisted silver vine blocking his path, and finds he has to run to catch up. Even ancient Keziah, with his rattling chest, is way ahead of him already.

It seems like hours and many kilometres later before they stop. Though how this is possible Bastian cannot fathom. Just up ahead he sees the broad back of a large, hunchbacked creature, but doesn’t take much notice as he has seen many odd-looking creatures these past few hours. Some were terrifying, others simply piteous. Blowing on his half-frozen fingertips in an attempt to stop frost bite from setting in, Bastian tries to take in his surroundings. A broad river flows alongside him. Grey, of course. A vast valley sprawls seemingly forever beyond its shores. He suddenly wonders why they have stopped, when he hears his Goddess call out the one word he has been waiting these past hours to hear, ‘*Marduke!*’

The hunchbacked creature up ahead stops and slowly turns. Bastian realises with a sudden thump deep in his chest, that this creature – this *beast* – is in fact Marduke, changed beyond recognition. The hideous sight makes him step backwards, losing his balance against a grey boulder. ‘Your Highness,’ he hisses, attempting to regain his composure. He tries to speak again, but finds he must first moisten his lips with a tongue turned dry. ‘Your Highness, are you ... are you sure you wish to return ... *that?*’

She doesn’t answer, and Bastian watches as she gulps deep in her throat and moisture fills her eyes. He gasps softly, his heart thundering even more loudly against his rib cage. The distraught look on his Goddess’s face – *the tears!* – something he has never seen on her before, never thought her capable of, shocks him.

Finally she breathes, ‘They will pay dearly for this. They will pay with blood, with fear, and with many lives.’

Chapter One

Isabel

Nowhere is safe any more. Every few weeks we change training grounds. Today we're on the mountain, on an open field over the top of Arkarian's chambers. Not that you can see Arkarian's chambers, they're hidden within the mountain. There is a secret entrance that can't be seen from the outside. It opens on command – usually only Arkarian's. The Guard has to maintain a high level of secrecy, our lives are constantly in danger. And since Marduke's death, nothing is the same. He died a year ago today.

Marduke thought he could use my brother Matt as bait. His plan for revenge ended up dragging Matt into the Guard before he was ready. Marduke had already killed Ethan's sister Sera, as part of his payback plan for losing half his face in an earlier conflict with Ethan's father Shaun. It was this fight that turned Marduke from being one of the Guard's trusted members, to a traitor.

A cold shiver runs through me. It's the memory of how close we came to losing so much. My brother for one. He didn't know anything about the Guard then. Now he's a member. Well, at least he's trying to be. Ethan is his Trainer, and I think Matt is proving to be a frustrating Apprentice.

I don't usually come up and watch Matt's sessions, unless I'm training too. But today Ethan asked me to assess Matt's progress. It's dangerous for all three of us to disappear after school together on a regular basis. Our history teacher Mr Carter, who is also one of the Named, is always warning us. 'You could attract attention,' he often says. 'You just never know who's watching.'

Our identities, though revealed to each other, have to remain concealed from any member of the Order who might be hanging around. There could be someone at school, one of our own 'friends' for all we know. The very thought sends another wave of shivers all over me. I rub my arms to get rid of the goose bumps under my jumper. It's not snowing up here yet, but the weather is turning colder now that winter is approaching. I just wish this day would hurry up and pass. I can't seem to get rid of the creepy feeling that something's going to go wrong.

'Hey, Isabel, are you OK over there? I've got a jacket in my bag. Why don't you put it on?'

I groan softly under my breath. That's Matt of course, overly concerned as ever. When will he understand I'm only one year younger than him and able to look after myself? Haven't I spent most of my life proving just that? 'I'm not cold!'

He gives me a long, frustrated, when-will-she-grow-up kind of look, which sets my blood boiling. I take a deep breath, reminding myself it's just the way he is. And he's not just protective of me. He takes what he perceives to be his responsibilities very seriously. Like watching over Mum, for instance. That's why he resents her boyfriend Jimmy so much, even though he's also a member of the Guard. (Mum's not, and she's never to find out.)

Maybe that's why Matt's the chosen one. Chosen by the Prophecy, that is, to be our leader. Arkarian explained it all. But I'm not so sure telling Matt was such a good idea. I wasn't shown the Prophecy until I was ready to handle it.

Ethan nudges Matt with an elbow. 'Come on, we've got a lot to get through today.'

Air hisses out between Matt's teeth and he rolls his eyes, totally frustrated. He knows that while he's picking up some good fighting techniques with all this training, it's his skills – his *powers* – that

are going to be his real strengths. But so far there has been no sign of any paranormal abilities whatsoever. I know my brother like the skin on my own hands. He's been drawn into the Guard before his time – a situation that couldn't be avoided. But now here he is, unprepared, his powers nowhere in sight, even after a whole year! No wonder he feels inadequate.

Mostly I understand what he's going through. So far only one of my powers has revealed itself – that of healing. I have another one, or perhaps even two, and don't know what they are yet. But since my healing skills have been useful, I feel a certain contentment, as if I'm pulling my weight within the Guard.

Now Ethan's powers are legendary. He's the illusionist. He can move things, too, with just his mind. And luckily for him, he has a third skill, his instinctive trust in the Prophecy. Last year, as a reward for his loyalty, a Tribunal gathering in Athens saw Lorian honour him with the power of flight. I don't mean that Ethan can suddenly fly like a bird. It's an ability to transport himself from one spot almost instantly, to another. Even though it's been a year, Ethan hasn't quite mastered using his wings yet. The other day he transported himself into a cow paddock, both feet firmly lodged in freshly dropped and steaming cow dung. When Matt and I got to the scene we couldn't stop laughing for at least an hour.

And to make matters worse, while Matt is physically fit, he's never been the sporty type, and hasn't a clue when it comes to self-defence. While I was into everything outdoorsy growing up, he was into protecting me. And now he just can't seem to slow his mind down long enough to find his centre of focus.

'Don't sweat it, Matt,' Ethan tries to reassure him. 'Your powers will reveal themselves when you're ready.'

Matt throws down his sword, point first into the soft, grass-covered earth. 'That's easy for you to say. Since I haven't developed any powers yet, Arkarian won't let me go on a mission. Do you know what that feels like?' He doesn't wait for Ethan to answer. 'No, you wouldn't. You've been going on missions since you were, what? Two years old?'

Ethan can't help a soft smile. He's proud of his service. But he's not going to rub it in. They have problems, these two. Only since Matt became Ethan's Apprentice have they started to trust each other. But it's a slow process. I don't know if they'll ever get back the friendship they had when they were kids. It all changed when Rochelle came to our school. Matt fell in love with her on first sight. Trouble was, so did Ethan. But Rochelle chose Matt and they were together for one-and-a-half years. Ethan was pushed aside. But it turns out Rochelle was only pretending to love Matt. She worked for the Order. Marduke was her master. And it was part of his plan for revenge on Ethan's father, that Rochelle blow Matt and Ethan's friendship to pieces. She played her part well, but at the battle last year in France, she defied Marduke and saved Matt's life. Despite that, Matt can't seem to let go of his resentment. And it hasn't helped that Rochelle's been away in hiding all this time. She's not a member of the Order any more. She defected and has chosen to join the Guard. The two of them need to talk. Otherwise he's not going to move on.

'Four,' Ethan begins explaining. 'I was four when Arkarian introduced me to this other world. But I was five before I was allowed to go on any missions – a whole year.'

Matt snorts, then tries another tack to prove his point. 'Isabel went on a mission after only three weeks of training.'

'But she already had one of her powers.'

'Yeah, healing! That would hardly protect her in a dangerous situation.'

'She's also very able, physically,' Ethan adds.

Matt kind of grunts an acceptance. His eyes shift sideways to where I'm sitting on a blank wall, hugging my knees. 'I know Isabel's different. She's kind of ...'

Ethan looks at me too. 'A freak of nature.'

He doesn't mean it literally. He's wearing a grin from ear to ear. Once I would have misread that look as flirting. It's hard not to. Ethan and I spend a lot of time together, and well, I really like him. I've always had for most of my life. But Ethan's made it pretty clear he's not interested in me romantically. We're just friends. Really good friends. And I'm OK with that. There's someone else I find myself thinking about. But, well, that relationship seems to be going nowhere too.

'Yeah,' Matt says, agreeing with Ethan about me. 'Even so, she gets allocated missions.'

'But not on my own,' I sing out. It's the one thing that really bugs me. OK, other than healing, I don't have any physical powers, but how many times do I have to prove to the Tribunal I'm physically capable? Sure, I don't look strong, being small and all, but if they would just give me a chance ...

'I just don't get how it's possible for anyone to be so physically driven.' I tune in to what Ethan is saying. 'Is there nothing your sister can't do to perfection, or die trying?'

I'm about to say, 'very funny', but the thought doesn't make it into words. A sudden explosion of pain rocks the inside of my head. Grabbing both sides of my face I hit the ground in front of me. I would call for help, but the pain is so intense the only sound possible is a gasping groan from deep in my throat.

'Isabel?'

I think that's Matt's voice, but something strange, something powerful, is happening inside my head. I open my eyes but only see white blinding light. It terrifies me and I shut them again. 'Oh hell ...'

'Isabel!'

Matt and Ethan run to either side of me, trying to help me sit up, but the light and the pain are too strong for me to move very much. 'Something ... something is wrong.'

'What is it?' Matt screams, then yells at Ethan, 'Go for help!'

Ethan puts his arms around my shoulders and starts rocking me gently. 'Can you tell us what's happening?'

'White light. Pain. Something wrong.'

'What are you doing?' Matt screams at Ethan. 'Can't you see she's in agony? What good will that do?'

'Give us a second, Matt,' he says. Then to me, 'Try to relax.'

I struggle to do as Ethan says, but the pain in my head is too intense. 'Can't.'

'Try again. Don't fight whatever it is.'

Somehow the pain eases and I sense a change. The light shifts, softening from bright white to grey and finally an image starts to form.

'What the hell is happening?' Matt yells, sounding frantic.

'Wait,' I manage to whisper, holding my hand up to allay some of Matt's fears. 'I'm OK.'

As I sit back on my heels the images trying to form in my head become clearer. They roll in front of my eyes like a movie for a few seconds. A movie that I can both see and feel. Unconsciously I clutch at my chest. The images bring with them a disturbing sense of horror and despair.

At last they disappear, and my heart rate starts to slow. But I'm shaking all over and can't seem to stop. I look straight up to the sky. It's blue, only a few cirrus clouds forming on the horizon to the north. Nothing serious. For a second I think I see something up there, like a flash of zigzag lightning.

of the most amazing colour, but that's impossible. Yet the dark images I just experienced have left me with a weird sense of impending catastrophe – a catastrophe that will come from the sky!

Digging my fingers into Ethan and Matt's arms for leverage, I stagger quickly to my feet. 'We have to get out of here!'

'What?' Matt glances around with a dumbfounded expression on his face. 'What's going on with you? You scared me half to death just then.'

I drag on their arms. There's no way I can explain the feeling I have right now, or the sense of disaster that has engulfed me with the passing of those strange images. 'Just come. Quickly.' I glance at the sky again, that urgent feeling growing unbelievably stronger, an urgency to get the hell out of this vast open field. 'We have to find shelter.'

Matt straightens his shoulders and puts his hands on his hips. 'What are you talking about? A minute ago I was ready to call an ambulance, now you look as if you're about to run a marathon.'

Ethan is easier to convince. He starts thinking straight away, pointing in a northerly direction. 'There's a cave. It's only a few minutes into the woods that way.'

'What's going on?' Matt asks, not understanding and growing more frustrated by the second. 'Someone explain.'

Ethan flicks him an impatient look. 'There's no time for an explanation. Just do what we say.'

I yank on Ethan's arm, but just as I'm about to start running, a chill sweeps through me. It feels as if the blood in my veins is turning to ice. Every hair on my body suddenly stands on end, including the ones on top of my head!

'What's happening?' Ethan cries out as his hair, and Matt's too, also stands on end. 'The air is alive.' Quickly he starts collecting our things – a rug and backpacks, some mugs we were drinking out of.

I grab his arm. 'We don't have time to collect our things. We'll get them later, OK?'

He drops what he's collected and starts to run, making sure to keep Matt in front of him. But we don't get far before a sudden screeching sound makes us stop dead and stare in the direction it came from the sky overhead. Then it happens again, this time with such force we have to cover our ears. It sounds like a piece of silk ripping into a thousand strings.

'What on earth ...?' Matt mutters, staring up at the sky.

Somewhere in my mind I know we should be running for shelter, but the sky has the three of us mesmerised. It's still blue, but in one place, almost directly overhead, something strange is happening. Something has started falling.

'Take cover!' Ethan calls out.

We hit the ground.

But whatever it is, it doesn't drop all the way. And when we dare to look up, we see something resembling a deep, dark hole in the sky.

'What could that be?' Ethan asks.

Before our eyes, the hole in the sky contracts as if sucking in a breath. Then from within it, clouds – if that's what they are – thick and black and shiny like oil fresh from the bowels of the earth, propel outwards. Again we fall to the ground, but there's no safety here, so we hurry to our feet.

Within seconds these black clouds roll across the hillside, darkening the area around us. Lightning in amazing colours of purple, green, yellow and brilliant red, streaks across the sky, spreading in tendrils in all different directions.

Ethan shakes me, and has to scream to be heard over a sudden burst of strong wind. 'Move!'

We start running again, as fast as we can without falling over, but that cave Ethan was talking about is still far away. We're not going to make it. Thunder, like I've never heard before, shatters the ground, making us stumble over wide-opening cracks. The air thickens, and hail starts to fall. But this is no ordinary hail. Besides the fact that it's freezing cold, this hail is jagged and heavy, like large sharply-angled rocks. And when it hits something solid, it explodes, burning a hole in its wake. It's as if the ice itself is composed of an unstable element. At least unstable in this world.

'Here!' Matt screams out. He whips his shirt off and throws it over my head. I squirm around until it covers the both of us, glancing up to see Ethan doing something similar with his own. So now I have two layers of fabric protecting me. I doubt it will have much effect, but it's worth a try. Anything would be, to protect us from this strange exploding hail.

'Look at that!' Matt calls out, keeping his head low. 'The hail's causing fires.'

'Unbelievable!' Ethan sounds stunned. 'Look at the holes in the ground.'

We keep running, leaping over the increasing number of holes. But it gets harder with every step as the sky grows even darker, so much that it would be easy to believe it were closer to midnight than four in the afternoon. As the hail and deafening thunder intensify, I notice the shirts being held over my head start turning red. The guys are using their arms to protect me! They're covering me, while taking most of the hits from the hail themselves. I scream and tug at their shirts, trying to find their arms. 'Pull them down! Stop, you idiots! I can look after myself!' They ignore me and continue to hold their arms purposefully out of reach.

Up ahead the tree-line draws closer, and the prospect of finding shelter under the canopy of the forest has us push our weary legs to their physical limits. But just as we get there a streak of purple lightning screeches over our heads, striking the tree directly before us. The power of the hit tosses the tree metres into the air. The three of us scramble around on all fours, momentarily disoriented. And if the other two are like me, dazed and deafened as well. Somehow we crawl to the forest edge, skirting around the tree, now nothing more than cracked and burning timber. Slowly the ringing in my ears decreases and my hearing returns.

Once inside the canopy of the forest the hail eases, but the storm intensifies, ripping trees from their roots and overturning boulders that twenty-ton cranes would have trouble shifting. It feels as if this storm has a purpose, and that purpose is to gobble us up!

'Here!' Ethan yanks on my arm. 'This way, I think.'

I see where he's heading, even though he can't see it yet himself. It's so dark in here, both Ethan and Matt would only be able to see a few feet in front of them. But thanks to my skill of sight, a gift from Lady Arabella last year at my Initiation in Athens, I can see much further. I take over the lead and in a matter of minutes find shelter beneath an overhanging ledge forming the entrance to Ethan's cave.

At last the three of us try to catch our breath. Ethan and Matt both collapse in a huddle on the rock floor. Hail has left horrid cuts on their upper bodies, faces and arms and heads. They're both bleeding from the wounds, but their burns are worse. And the way Ethan is holding his head, he could even have a mild concussion.

I try to get my breathing back to normal quickly and start working on healing them straight away. I want to take Ethan's arm, but he pushes me away. 'Do Matt first.'

Matt protests, but I snap at him, 'You're only making Ethan wait longer by arguing, so shut up Matt, and let me do my work.'

It seems to take for ever, the stench of their burning flesh overwhelming me for a minute so that

find it difficult to start visualising what needs to be done. I force myself to concentrate. Finally they're both healed and the three of us sit under the protective rocky ledge staring out at the strange storm that's now settled into a heavy rain depression. Drenched to the bone, we huddle together for warmth. The temperature has fallen to somewhere near freezing point.

'What the hell was that?' Matt asks.

I feel Ethan's shoulders lift, unable to answer. Slowly he turns his head in my direction, his eyebrows rising. I can almost see his thoughts ticking over. He's remembering the strange phenomenon I experienced earlier, giving me a warning of what was to come. He's figuring it out, thinking I had some sort of 'vision'. But I'm not sure he's on the right path. I'm also not sure I want to hear his theory. My mind's in a mess right now, a headache beginning to take shape.

If I did receive some sort of 'vision' or warning, who's to say it will happen again? It was hardly a warning at all really. That storm erupted too quickly. It would be a useless skill to have in that sense.

'Isabel? You got any ideas?' Ethan's hand does a wide sweep of the devastation surrounding us and I notice a slight tremor he can't conceal. 'Is this what you saw? This ... this hurricane?'

But how can I tell him this storm was not exactly what I saw, but more the tail end of what I felt? What I saw is unexplainable. A place of darkness, pain and suffering, where fear and despair loomed around your heart like a cage from which there is no escape.

I shudder suddenly and Matt tries to warm my arms with his hands. 'I'm OK!' I say these words with more force than I mean. Instantly I'm regretful and start to say so, but he gets up and moves away, leaning against the edge of the cave opening.

'Isabel?' Ethan reminds me that I haven't answered his question.

I keep my voice soft enough so Matt doesn't hear. 'I'm not exactly sure what I saw, Ethan. The "vision" was very strange. And this storm, it's just so unreal. I can't be certain the two are connected.'

We're silent for a moment, and the rain begins to ease. And if I'm not mistaken, patches of blue sky start breaking through where trees have been uprooted. 'Who would have thought this beautiful sunny day would have ended this way?'

'Exactly,' Ethan says. 'What I want to know is why we weren't warned.'

I gaze at him in a puzzled way. 'What are you talking about?'

'Aren't hurricanes usually tracked for days before they hit land? I heard the weather report this morning. There was no mention of a hurricane.'

'We don't get hurricanes, Ethan. These are the highlands, not the tropics. And it's not even summer!'

'So what did we get?'

My eyes drift to where Ethan has picked up a small stick and started poking at a rock between his feet. 'Look, I don't really know, but it had a lot of power. Did you ever see hail like that? Ice that ignites when it hits something solid?'

He stares at me. 'What are you saying?'

I don't want to scare Ethan or anything, but he is asking for my opinion. And I know he wouldn't want to hear a watered down version just because it isn't pleasant. He's not like that. 'There's something else.'

'Go on.'

'It felt to me as if the storm came *through* the sky. As if it came from another world.'

Chapter Two

Arkarian

They're coming to see me, and they're looking for answers. Ethan, in particular, seems anxious. Whatever he's seen has shaken him badly. He'll want an explanation. And while I've lived for six hundred years, accredited master in the hierarchy of the Guard for many of those, I certainly don't know everything, as Ethan often likes to tell me. Even the Tribunal are experiencing surprises lately with Lathenia in such a rage.

Of course Isabel is coming too. I glance down at my clothes – black pants, blue jumper. I pull the elastic out of my hair, it falls loose around my shoulders. What will Isabel think? I stop myself and take a steadying breath. What does it matter? It's not as if she will notice. She once believed herself in love with Ethan. Perhaps she still is.

'Arkarian!'

It's Ethan, calling from just inside my chamber's secret door. As usual when he's overwrought, he can't screen his thoughts from me, no matter how hard I train him. One day it could prove dangerous. There are plenty of Truthseers out there in the world and they're hardly going to announce it to anyone. Marduke was one while he lived, as well as all nine members of the Tribunal. And of course truthseeing is one of Rochelle's skills.

'Did you see that thing?' Ethan storms into my work station with Isabel trailing behind.

'Hey,' Isabel says with a small smile.

'Hello, Isabel.' Total blank. She's masking her thoughts well.

'Did you see what happened up there?' Ethan asks, trying to look calm. 'What was that? What does it mean?'

Holding out my hands, I produce three wooden stools. The same three I made as a young boy. The only items I managed to salvage from one of my childhood lodgings.

The three of us sit in a triangle, and I'm glad to see they haven't brought Matt with them. Even though he's been in training for quite a while now, he's still not comfortable in my chambers. The equipment startles him – soundless technology, centuries ahead of its time. I remember when he first peered into my 3-D holographic sphere, and realised he was looking into the past, he wanted to get out so fast, he would have gone through a wall if it wasn't made of solid rock.

Ethan's fingers close around one of my arms. 'Arkarian! What was it?'

'I'll explain what I know. But you have to tell me what you saw first.'

His hands fly into the air. 'It was incredible. Something falling. Black clouds like ... like ... nothing I've seen before.'

'There was this sound,' Isabel says.

Isabel's words, more than Ethan's, send a chill up my spine. That unusual storm this afternoon has aroused my suspicions. I have to keep assuring myself that even the Goddess, consumed with grief for this whole past year, would not want a rift to form between our mortal world and any other. 'A sound? Isabel? What sort of sound?'

'A shredding sound. Ear piercing.'

Her words make my heart beat hard and loud. ‘Tell me about those first moments. Did you notice anything unusual? A strange light? A smell or odour? A glimpse of darkness?’

‘Yes, yes,’ Ethan replies in a rush. ‘All of those things, I think.’

Isabel frowns. ‘I don’t remember an odour, only the smell of your skin burning with that hair.’

‘You have to believe us, Arkarian. It was ... eerie. Our hair stood on end!’

‘I believe you, Ethan.’ I just don’t want to create panic, I add silently. Even in the depths of hope and despair at losing Marduke, or her anger that a member of the Guard could eliminate her highest ranking soldier, why would Lathenia take such a risk? Has she lost control of her objectivity, even her sanity?

Ethan sits, and using his training, attempts to calm down. It’s unusual seeing him like this. He has experienced a lot of strange happenings in his time with the Guard. It’s usually hard to faze him.

‘Where do you think that storm came from?’ he asks.

Isabel is already making her own assumptions. ‘That storm was unearthly, that’s all I’m going to say.’ She looks straight into my eyes. Suddenly my thoughts are hurled into confusion and I find myself have to look away. I try to think why. I know that I’m on edge. Everyone is at this time. Our spies say Lathenia is close to discovering Ethan’s identity. And she knows I was the one who planned our strategy the day Marduke was killed, so she wants to take her revenge on me too. But as I don’t circulate in the mortal world any more, Ethan is more at risk.

It could be because Isabel’s words are so near the possible truth.

I force myself to return a steady gaze and choose the words that won’t increase their fears. They have to remain calm to keep doing their good work. And while Isabel’s powers still haven’t completely emerged, her healing skill is unequalled in the Guard’s history so far. ‘Lathenia is simply in a rage at losing Marduke. It’s the first anniversary of his death today. Try not to concern yourself too much.’

Isabel says softly, ‘She has a very dark rage, Arkarian.’

Ethan jumps in, ‘I’ll say. Isabel knows all about it. Just before the storm hit—’

She whacks him with the back of her hand. He almost falls off his stool.

So, there’s something else. Something that happened before the storm hit that Isabel doesn’t want me to know about. I focus on Ethan for a second, but he’s trying hard to conceal his thoughts. And while he’s not succeeding very well, he has managed to scramble them enough so that I can’t make any sense of them. Well, if Isabel wants to keep something from me, that’s her choice. I won’t intrude. My only concern is that what she keeps from me has something to do with what she saw up on the ridge today. I don’t want either of these two getting involved in something they can’t handle.

An awkward silence follows. Ethan finds himself suddenly fascinated by each hairline crack in the rock walls, while Isabel, whose face has turned the colour of blood, studies the tips of her brown boots. I decide I’d better put them out of their misery before they both bolt for the door. I have other things to tell them, but first I have to ask, ‘How is Matt’s training progressing?’

The two of them glance at each other, their eyes opening wide. Isabel’s shoulders lift, but not in a negative way, more a defeatist one. The look exchanged concerns me deeply. ‘Ethan, explain.’

He flicks Isabel a strangely apologetic glance first. ‘Matt’s hopeless, Arkarian. Totally uncoordinated. Are you sure the Prophecy is talking about him? I mean, could the Tribunal have got it wrong? Maybe Matt’s not the one. Maybe he’s not even supposed to be a member of the Guard, let alone, you know, supposed to lead the Named.’

‘Matt was *Named* before his own birth. Before yours too, Ethan,’ I tell him simply.

‘Well, he’s not doing so well.’

‘Then you’ll have to work harder.’

Ethan makes a scoffing sound as if the idea is outrageous. ‘I don’t know what else I can do. I mean we train every day. And he’s stressing about not having any powers yet.’

To me the answer lies there. ‘Ease up on trying to evolve his paranormal skills. He’s probably putting too much pressure on himself. That would only cause a mental block. But keep working on his physical skills. He’ll need those to defend himself. They’ll be a backup until his powers emerge and he has time to work on them.’

Ethan sees my point. ‘OK, I’ll try.’

Silence descends again, and I can’t put it off any longer. I have to tell Isabel about her forthcoming mission. It’s the moment I’ve been dreading. This mission has been rushed, with orders coming straight from the Tribunal, specifically from Lorian, none other than our own Immortal. Normally I wouldn’t be worried about sending Isabel on a mission, especially paired up with Ethan, but this mission has come with orders that refer specifically to me.

I clear my throat a couple of times, buying myself some time. It has the opposite effect of making Ethan and Isabel stare straight at me.

‘Well now, there’s something I have to tell you ...’

Isabel leans forward and her aura embraces mine for a fleeting moment. It takes my breath away and I find I have to start my explanation all over again. ‘It’s like this you see ... the next mission is to be yours, Isabel. But the details are sketchy. I’m not the one monitoring this time period, or the portal that’s starting to open as we speak.’ My eyes drift to the holographic sphere, then flick away.

Ethan frowns. ‘So what’s the problem? When do we leave?’

‘This is what I’m trying to tell you: you’re not going with her, Ethan.’

Isabel’s head snaps back as a smile takes form. She thinks she’s figured out what I’m saying. She throws a hand into the air, her voice brimming with excitement. ‘Yes! I get to do this one on my own! About time you lot started trusting me.’

But she hasn’t understood. I tell her quickly, ‘It’s not what you think. You’re not going on your own.’

She slumps back on to her stool, her mouth pulling into an irritated smirk. ‘Great. How can I show that I’m capable of working alone, if you don’t give me the chance? I may not have powers of physical strength, but I can take care of myself. I can dispense with a soldier as easily as the other more experienced members of the Named – Shaun or Jimmy, or Mr Carter.’

‘It’s not that we think you can’t complete a solo mission, Isabel. Quite simply, it’s too dangerous to send anyone out alone at this time. Normally it would be Ethan going with you. The two of you work well together. But my orders are a directive from the Tribunal, with no explanation offered of the forthcoming.’

‘What are you trying to say, Arkarian?’ she asks.

I don’t answer for a minute, wondering why Lorian would do this to me. Finally I just spit it out. ‘Isabel, I am going to be your partner.’

She doesn’t say a word, but her mouth drops open and colour drains from her face. After a minute she collects herself and sits upright, taking a big breath.

I think about her strange reaction, trying to interpret what it means, but draw a blank.

She licks her lips. My eyes are drawn there.

She notices and swallows deeply. 'Right,' she says, her voice strangely hoarse. She coughs into her hand and my eyes fly up to hers. Her mouth moves, but words seem to escape her.

Ethan starts to laugh, breaking the tension that seems to crackle in the room. I look at him and he covers his mouth with his hand and shakes his head.

'What's with you?' Isabel snaps at him.

'Oh nothing,' he says, looking like a cat with a bowl of cream between his paws. 'So when do you two leave?'

'Tonight,' I say.

'You'd better get to bed early then, Isabel. And remember, you have to act as normal as possible, or your mother will suspect something strange is going on. And don't forget you have to be asleep for transportation to take place.'

'Why are you telling me all this? I know how it works. I've been before. Remember? A hundred times.'

'Yeah, but your brain's not working real good right now,' Ethan says.

She kicks him. Hard. Her foot connecting with his shin. It must hurt. He winces, grimacing at her.

Isabel slowly regains her composure. 'Where are ...?' She stops and starts again. 'I mean, where are we going? And ... ah, how long will we be away – *together*?'

'We go back to France, to a year somewhere around the middle of the Hundred Years War, to protect the life of a six-year-old child. And as for how long we'll be there – *together* – I really don't know.'

Chapter Three

Isabel

I'm going on a mission with Arkarian. *Arkarian!* And it could take days. Maybe months. Who knows. And all this time Arkarian and I will be together. *Together!*

As I lie in bed goose bumps break out on my arms and I pull the blanket up tightly around my shoulders. But I'm not cold really. It's just the thought of my upcoming mission, the thought of spending so much time with Arkarian. *Alone!* I remember the last time I was this excited. It was my first mission. I was with Ethan and we went to England. We were in John of Gaunt's bedroom, when suddenly Ethan kissed me. But that kiss was only an excuse to get us out of a sticky situation. Arkarian wouldn't use that tactic no matter how awkward the situation we might find ourselves in. Could he? If the situation were desperate?

I roll on to my side. If I don't get to sleep soon I won't be going at all. Of course, my physical body won't be going anywhere. It will stay here in my bed and appear as if I'm only sleeping. The body is, after all, merely a vessel for the soul. So when I shift to the Citadel, I'll have a new one that's kind of on loan. Only my eyes will remain the same. They can't change, 'cause they're connected to the soul. The Citadel controls all this. It's a wondrous place. And most importantly, this new identity will protect me from being recognised in the past.

I close my eyes, willing them to stay that way, but can't stop the thousands of thoughts racing around inside my head.

The moon makes an appearance outside my window and I get up to close the curtains. It won't make much difference, though. Lady Arabella's gift of seeing through all forms of light still keeps me awake at night sometimes. Like tonight, when I'm finding it hard to slow down, it takes a great effort to control the gift.

While at the window I take a deep breath, drawing in some of the cool breeze that's blowing. It's then I notice a silver flash over the mountain. It creeps me out. I shut my window and hop back into bed, hoping that strange bright flash is not the beginning of another eerie storm.

This time when I close my eyes my mind drifts towards sleep. I sigh deeply, relaxing further, and at last my body is succumbing to the peaceful state needed to make the transition. I lie in this drowsy state of half-sleep, half-wakefulness for a few moments, when images start to form inside my head and I wonder what's going on. Am I dreaming?

I see a beautiful lake with a family of ducks wading in the shallows, surrounded by water lilies. There's a wooden deck jutting part way into this lake, with a boat moored to a pole by a looped rope. It's small and painted red with blue writing on its side. A woman is sitting on the deck to the right of this boat, her legs dangling in the water, shoulders hunched forward. Her hands are folded over each other in her lap. She's looking down at her hands as if she's holding something precious there. Even though I can't see myself in this dream, I sense that I'm walking on the deck towards this woman, every step taking me nearer to knowing her identity and discovering the secret she is guarding in her palms.

The dream intensifies. I can hear the click-clack sounds my shoes make as they strike the boards beneath my feet. For a second I think the woman hears me too. She looks to her left, but remains

silent. It's enough time for me to recognise her though. She's Laura Roberts, Ethan's mother.

'Mrs Roberts?' I ask in my dream.

She doesn't respond, just appears to look through me.

'Laura? What are you doing?' I peer over her shoulder. 'What have you got there?'

I see her hands clearly, and the sight of that much blood has me gasping and stepping backward. My own hands come up to cover my mouth as I take a closer look. Trying not to retch at the sight, I study her carefully. She is bleeding from vertical slits to her arms that stretch from her wrists to halfway towards her elbows. Blood has soaked through her skirt, through the timber decking, to the water below. A long-bladed knife slips through her weakening fingers to splash softly into the lake.

I try to scream, but find myself sitting up in my dark bedroom, the dream very much still with me. I shake my head to rid myself of the image, but it doesn't disappear. It's as if there is more to the dream that I must see. Gathering my thoughts, I try to reach out to Laura, but some invisible force holds me back, as if my role is to watch and not interfere. Shocked, and unable to get rid of the image of Laura Roberts attempting to kill herself, I scream out.

My scream brings Matt, with my mother behind him, bursting through my bedroom door.

'What's going on?' Mum pushes past Matt in her hurry to get to me. 'Did you have a nightmare?'

Matt comes over to the other side of my bed and switches on my bedside lamp. The room fills with light that hurts my eyes. I squint and try to cover them; that dream still causing my heart to pound like a horse at full pelt.

Mum pushes the hair off my forehead with tender stroking fingers. 'Are you OK?'

'She's all right, Mum,' Matt says. 'I'll look after her.'

Mum looks at me and I try to reassure her. 'He's right. There's nothing to worry about. It was just a dream. You can go back to bed. Really.'

She hesitates. 'Are you sure, darling? Can I make you a warm cocoa first?'

I force a smile to my face. 'No, I'm fine, really. I don't need anything.'

She finally relents. 'All right, but if you want to talk you know I'm just across the hallway.'

'I'll call out if I need you, but Mum, I'm OK.'

'Jimmy will be back soon. You can talk to him too, you know.'

Matt's jaw drops open. 'She doesn't need Jimmy. I'm here!'

'Of course you are,' Mum says. 'I didn't mean—'

I grab her hand. 'It's all right, Mum. Don't worry about Matt. I like Jimmy. I really do. I don't mind at all that he lives here now.'

Mum smiles and looks more relaxed. And once she's sure I'm all right, she goes back to bed.

Matt makes himself comfortable in my green inflatable lounge. 'What was all that screaming about?'

'I had a bad dream. And I thought I only screamed once.'

He shrugs. 'You didn't have another of those weird visions, did you?'

As soon as he says this, my heart, which is only just starting to slow down, leaps half-way up my throat. Could it have been a *vision*? Everyone knows how depressed Laura is. She never got over losing her daughter, Sera, thirteen years ago. And didn't Ethan say something only the other day about how she isn't getting any better, even though his father's been so supportive? And that even though the doctors think she should be making a recovery by now, but can't understand why she isn't?

‘Oh hell!’

‘What did you see?’ Matt asks.

Matt’s question has me shifting straight into denial. I mean, it was a *dream*, not a *vision*, like the other one when my head felt as if it was going to explode. There was none of that pain or light this time. My concern for Ethan and his mother brought it on, that’s all. If I tell Ethan it will only make him more worried, and he worries like hell as it is.

‘Isabel?’

But if I don’t tell Ethan, and it *was* a vision ...? Maybe there was no pain ’cause I was in that relaxed state of near sleep, and wasn’t in a position to fight or tense up.

‘Isabel! What the hell is going on? Speak to me.’

I hold my hand up to stop Matt’s questions from interrupting my thoughts. I need a couple more seconds to figure this out. The last time I experienced a vision, the reality occurred only seconds later. This notion has me scooting out of bed and stumbling through a dark hallway towards the phone.

Matt follows and switches on a light. ‘When are you going to realise that you don’t have to solve every problem on your own?’

I bring the phone half-way to my ear. ‘What did you say?’

‘You’re not alone in this world, Isabel. You don’t have to prove you can do everything by yourself. It’s about time you realised he’s not coming back.’

My mouth forms a soundless gasp. He never talks about Dad! ‘You’re out of line.’

‘Am I? Then why do you resent my help so much?’ He turns away.

‘Look,’ I call out. ‘I didn’t mean to ignore you before. My dream has nothing to do with whatever crazy place your thoughts are right now. And just for the record, I’m used to doing things for myself. I like it that way. That’s all there is to it.’ I can see he doesn’t believe me. ‘Your idea of helping me is more like total suffocation.’

My words sting, but I don’t have time for this right now. ‘I have to ring Ethan, OK?’

He glances around the hallway as if searching for a clock on the wall. ‘Isn’t it a bit late to be making phone calls?’

I brush him away with a wave of my hand, covering the mouthpiece for a second. ‘I have to make this one.’

He groans. ‘Don’t tell me you’re still fantasising over Ethan. Were you dreaming about him again?’

Now why does he have to bring my past infatuation into the conversation? ‘Go away,’ I hiss at him. ‘I told you I’m over Ethan.’

‘Well I don’t believe you,’ he says, but wanders back to his room anyway.

On the seventh ring Ethan answers in a groggy voice, ‘Yeah?’

‘Ethan, it’s me.’

‘Huh? Isabel? What’s up? Aren’t you supposed to be sleeping so you can be transported to the Citadel?’

‘Yes, but ...’

He reads my silence correctly. ‘Oh no, did you have a vision or something?’

‘Or something is right.’

‘What did you see?’

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