

CHAPTER TWELVE  
INTO THE BEYOND



“We need a plan,” Elodie announced.

She was leaning on the couch in the living room as Leilani put some strange ointment on a jagged cut on her cheek. Flynn sat in a chair opposite her, Jax was looking at the labels on some medicine, and Silver was humming some unrecognizable tune under her breath.

“We can’t just stay here forever recuperating,” Elodie continued.

“You *were* just captured and tortured in a creepy underworld,” Leilani shot back, screwing the cap back on the ointment she had given Elodie. “I think you can spend some more time *recuperating*.”

“For once, my sister might be right,” Jax joked. Leilani just ignored him.

“I know, but—” Elodie cleared her throat and stood up, about to start some elaborate speech about how they’d recuperated enough, containing well-constructed evidence with clear data and blah, blah, blah. But before she could even begin, she winced in agony as pain shot up her ankle where the Civma had slashed a deep cut. She fell back onto the couch. “Ow.”

“Point taken,” Leilani said. “You’re absolutely right. You can’t just sit here forever—but you guys aren’t ready yet to go out. You’re hurt. You need to rest for a bit.”

“Define *a bit*?” Elodie raised her eyebrow.

“Two days,” Leilani answered. “With possibly a few extra hours. Depends on how long it takes for your wounds to fully heal.”

Elodie groaned and threw her head backward. She hated sitting like this, not doing anything.

Flynn took Leilani’s side. “She has a point E. If we go out in this shape, we risk making our injuries worse, and that would be really bad if we have to battle Autumn.”

Elodie hoped it wouldn’t come to that.

“While you wait here,” Leilani continued, “we could try to find more information about what to expect in Midside. Since no one can use the gazebo buttons a second time—weird TS magic or something—either Jax or I should go with you guys, and one of us can press the button. Right when the portal

opens, we can grab your hands and pull you with us.

“And, for the record, I,” Leilani’s face looked pained as she strained to get the words out, “think ... Jax would be a good fit for going with you,” she said quickly, then exhaled. “He’s brave and good at fighting, plus he has a scarily good memory and can be a better guide than I’d be. It’d be better if I stay back here, planning what to do if things go wrong, rather than going on the journey itself.”

Jax grinned, “I knew it!” He didn’t say anything else, but he straightened up a bit and seemed taller and more confident.

Elodie didn’t want to feel glad, but she did. She liked Jax more than Leilani and was glad he was coming instead of her. He was just more pleasant to be around, more fun, and less stressful. That was not to say that Leilani wasn’t fun; she just ... something about her rubbed Elodie the wrong way.

To be honest, she wasn’t sure she liked Leilani that much. Leilani was bossy and headstrong. She probably meant well ... but Elodie still wasn’t a big fan. Maybe that opinion would change later. She wasn’t sure.

Something growled. Everyone turned to look at Jax.

“Is a monster stuck inside your stomach?” Elodie smirked.

“I’m hungry,” Jax answered, then thought about it for a moment.

“Or both.”

“It *is* lunchtime,” Leilani admitted. “Let’s head to the kitchen.”

Elodie nodded. She carefully lowered her feet onto the ground, feeling the cold tiles between her toes. She wiggled them, delighting in how she didn't feel any spikes of pain shooting up her foot like last time. Carefully and slowly, she stood up, using the couch's armrest to help her. Her legs felt stronger—so strong she decided to test out their strength. She took a step forward. Her ankle didn't protest at the movement, so she took another.

Elodie must have taken forever doing those simple movements because Jax finally said, "So, are we going to the kitchen or not?"

"We are." Flynn stood up and assisted Elodie to the kitchen table. Unlike Elodie, her legs were fine.

Slowly, Elodie lowered herself into a seat. Going just that short distance had caused her ankle to throb in pain. She winced but didn't move a muscle.

Leilani gave everyone sandwiches with kessie meat (some sort of popular TS creature meat that was eaten everywhere), some red cheese-like thing called "blip," and a salad. For a while, the group had a peaceful lunch, just talking, laughing, and enjoying the pleasant atmosphere filling the kitchen. As she ate, Elodie's muscles slowly relaxed, and the pain in her ankle subsided.

"So," asked Silver, "what's Lowlandin like?"

"Small," Jax said, "but cozy. It's not much, but it's all Leilani and I have ever known. It has a nice little main street. A good comic book store too,"

he added, at which Flynn's eyes brightened.

“And the woods are great for adventuring. We used to go all the time as a family ... My dad loved night hikes, and we would all go together. Sometimes my mom would bring nets so we could catch night bugs, but we would always free them after.” Jax's eyes clouded over with nostalgia as he talked. “And sometimes we'd even eat dinner in the woods and have a picnic. I would look forward to those days all week.”

“Wow, your parents sound great,” Silver said quietly, looking down. She tossed her salad around with her fork.

There was an awkward silence.

“Not to be nosy, but I'm curious ... Where are your parents now?” Flynn asked Leilani and Jax.

Leilani's face fell. “About a year ago our parents were sucked into Lidia and we haven't seen them since. We've risked everything to try to get them back, but haven't succeeded yet.”

Elodie felt her chest sink. This explained the hollow sadness Elodie had noticed earlier in Leilani's eyes when she'd said “creepy underworld.” Elodie felt bad for Leilani and Jax. Nobody their age should have to deal with something like this, but there was nothing Elodie could do, nor anything she could say to make it better.

Talking about Jax and Leilani's parents reminded Elodie of her family,

and just like that, a thorn appeared in her chest, stabbing and stabbing and stabbing. The pain in her ankle had been nothing compared to it.

*I have to get back. I have to get back home.*

Elodie dropped her sandwich onto her plate and said seriously, “Every second we spend here, Autumn gets close to the Ember Stone. *Every. Single. Second.*”

“We feel fine,” Flynn seconded, “or we will feel fine by the time we start our journey.”

*She took my side this time.* Elodie exhaled in relief, remembering when Flynn had sided with Leilani earlier.

Leilani sighed. “Fine. *One* more day.” She looked around the table. “Then you guys can continue. Also, since we’ve decided Jax is coming along with you guys, I have something for you.”

Leilani reached into her pocket and brought out a silver necklace. Hanging from the chain was a small conch shell. Leilani passed it to Silver, who looked at it in awe.

“If you ever need me,” Leilani continued, “squeeze the necklace with your left hand. I’ll be summoned immediately. It’s powerful magic, so use it carefully and wisely. It only works once.”

The room seemed to go completely silent as Silver carefully and gingerly put the necklace over her head. She trailed her fingers across it,