

1
Strife



The rain poured down from darkened skies as the silver Mercedes pulled into the driveway in front of our large, yellow two-story home. I was returning from a summer long European backpacking trip... or so my parents thought. Instead, I'd traveled deep into the wilderness of Vancouver Island to spend the summer with Telacki and Zari. Now, I was missing them horribly, having left Zari at the airport when my parents picked me up.

My parents were monumentally upset as we drove home. The dark, ominous skies mirrored the tone in the car since they felt I was too young at seventeen to even consider such a serious commitment as Zari and I had made. What made matters even worse with my parents was that they had no idea that Zari even existed until about two hours earlier. I looked down at the whopping diamond engagement ring on my left hand and sighed as I pictured him in my mind in all of his masculine beauty. A shiver raced up my spine.

My arrival home this time was much different, and had been uncomfortable at best, far from the joy elicited when I returned home after being lost in the wilderness. I worried the worst was yet to come. I was glad that my brother, Patrick, hadn't accompanied my parents to pick me up, considering the gloom in the car.

To make the situation worse, Patrick had become close friends with Garrett and the news of my engagement to Zari would undoubtedly cause more than a little discord with my brother, not to mention breaking Garrett's heart. I was, however, even more

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thankful that Garrett was working, and therefore, absent when I introduced Zari to my parents at the airport. That meeting had been awkward at best, and Garrett's presence would've further complicated matters. I took in a deep breath as if to draw in some courage before opening the car door.

My dad strode toward the front door, pausing only long enough to unlock it. He hadn't even bothered to pull the Mercedes into the garage, he was so upset. I grabbed my luggage and stormed after him, running up the brick sidewalk and into the house.

Dad was an intellectual, a thinker, so he was anything but spontaneous, hating surprises, and I'd just dumped the mother of all surprises on him. Being Irish-Italian, the Irish side and the seldom seen temper inherited with it, dominated him at the moment as he grappled with an unsuccessful attempt to keep me from making, what he felt to be, a colossal mistake.

Mom's worry was apparent also as she scurried behind me. Though her worries mirrored those of my dad, she was even more concerned about the pain inflicted upon me by his abrupt and scurrilous disapproval of my news.

I ran up the stairs to my bedroom, followed by an overjoyed Lashi. Once in my room, I dropped to my knees and hugged the wolf.

"I missed you so much," I said as I rubbed him vigorously. I felt his reciprocation as he wiggled and squirmed with delight. He was a sweet diversion since I was still horribly upset by my parents' overt displeasure at the announcement of my engagement. Though I'd expected their disapproval, I still smarted from my dad's threat to keep Zari and me apart. I'd threatened to leave home on my eighteenth birthday and never see them again if they tried to stop us from seeing each other. For now, though, I just wanted to be alone and allow time for my dad to cool down.

I threw my backpack on the overstuffed pink chair in the corner of my bedroom and climbed into the middle of my canopy bed, the canopy part being obscured by ivies and orchids growing on and cascading over it. I'd grown the plants above the bed as a reminder of the day Zari had decorated my bed with wildflowers and ivy in the room of the cave where I was living. I'd loved his overtly romantic gesture, having awakened to the lovely flowers woven within garlands of ivy above my head. I'd promised never to lose that memory to time.

Zari, are you there? I miss you already. I called him in my mind.

I'm here, my love. The answer came back immediately. *Are you alright? I could hear your parent's thoughts and they were mortified by our news.*

I'm OK. It could've been worse. I'll just stay away from them until they have time to calm down. It'll be fine eventually, I'm sure. If not, I'll be eighteen soon enough. I miss you terribly, though.

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About that time, I heard my mom yell up the stairs, "Come downstairs, Gracie."

I gotta go, my mom's calling. I love you and will talk to you later tonight. I sent the thought his way.

"Coming, Mom."

I descended the stairs, dreading the upcoming conversation. My parents were in the living area, seated in their matching brown leather chairs.

"Have a seat," Dad ordered. I sat gingerly on the edge of the overstuffed leather sofa, cringing as my parents stared at me, their faces telling the story.

"Would you like to tell us exactly how this happened?" Dad asked, his mouth twitching almost imperceptibly and his tone flat as he spoke. I could tell anger still consumed him, wreaking havoc with his self-control.

"OK, but please let me finish before you say anything." I was trembling as I spoke. I'd never seen my parents so upset, having never been rebellious. "It began a while back," I began. "I met Zari online. We've been cyber dating for a long time now." I hated lying, but I knew it had to be done, even though I tried to include as much truth as possible. I was certain my dad would have me committed, should I spill the entire truth surrounding the Forest People. Of course, I was bound by their laws to keep their reality a secret anyway. Even if I did try to explain their role in my life, the mere mention of their existence would have been considered a fantasy of epic proportions by my scientifically minded father.

I shuddered again, perspiration forming in tiny beads on my forehead as I continued. "It's been serious for a while, but I didn't think you'd approve so I kept it a secret until now."

"You're damn right we wouldn't approve of such a fool notion," Dad roared as he slammed his fist down on the arm of the chair. Mom placed a calming hand on Dad's arm in an effort to diffuse his rage as he glared, red faced, at me.

"At first, I even dated Garrett to please you so you wouldn't worry about me," I said, shaking my head and frowning as I said the words. "I *do* love Garrett, too, but I'm *in love* with Zari. When we had the opportunity to meet in Europe, we took the chance, and we're better together than I ever dreamed. I've never been happier in my entire life. This *will* work between us. We've been together since we moved here from New York. I know you think I'm too young, but really, I'm not. Garrett's parents got married at this age and they're happy. In fact, Garrett wanted to marry me when I turned eighteen also. I would've done it, too, if not for Zari. So, you can be angry at Garrett, too."

This time it was Mom that looked surprised.

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"Honey, I knew you two seemed serious, but I certainly never thought it was *that* serious. Don't you really think you should reconsider any committed relationship until you graduate college and get a job?"

"Mom, I appreciate that you're worried about me, but I really don't want to wait to start my life with Zari. If you want to fight me on this, as I said, I'll leave when I turn eighteen. I love you both and Patrick, and don't want to have to do that. If you'll just give us a chance, you'll see, I promise. He's more than I could ever hope for or dream of. If you try to stop me from seeing him, we've already discussed it. We'll be OK until I'm eighteen. We *will* wait for one another. Please just give us a chance so we can all be happy together."

There was an awkward silence draping the room for what seemed like an eternity before Dad exhaled deeply and finally spoke. He'd managed, with much effort, to rein in his rage, realizing that any attempt to control my heart was futile since I'd be eighteen in seven and a half short months.

"OK," he said, his voice restrained. "We'll give you two a chance, but if we see he's not right for you, then we'll expect you to leave this alone. Understood?" He paused and then added, "Are you sleeping with this boy?"

"No, Dad! For your information, it's against what he believes, and we've promised each other to wait until we're married." I gaped at my parents, red faced, a mixture of anger and embarrassment clouding my face, though there was no surprise in the bluntness of his question, considering he's a physician. I glanced at Mom, but found no solace there before taking a deep breath and continuing. "There won't be any problems, I promise. I know everything about him, both good and bad, and you'll see, we're truly soul mates," I gushed. "Can I go to my room and unpack now?"

"OK, but we're going to want to know more about this boy after you get settled back in," Dad winced as he spoke, his face still somewhat flushed.

"No problem," I said as I headed for the stairs. I couldn't wait to get away from them, from their disapproval. The silence I left downstairs as I fled was deafening.

2

A Spark of Hope



I fell across my pillow topped bed, trying desperately to rein in my fragmented emotions. I fought back tears as I thought of how upset my parents were with me. *I've got to get a grip*, I thought as tears flowed down my cheeks, the visible manifestation of my psychological overload. Still, a glimmer of hope flickered in my heart as it sank in that my dad said they would not keep me from seeing Zari. Slowly, as the weight of the realization expanded in my thoughts, the hurt over our confrontation abated and was replaced by more encouraging contemplations. *I can have both worlds! It's all working out really better than I thought*, I gushed mentally. A grin slowly spread across my face as I suppressed an ecstatic squeal, jumping from my bed and racing to grab my cell phone from the nearby white dresser. I fell into my overstuffed pink chair under the window as I punched in the number, bathed in rays of sunlight peeking through after the earlier rain. This time, telepathy wasn't enough, I needed to *hear* Zari's voice.

The phone rang three times before Analetta answered. The cheerful voice on the other end didn't wait. "Well, how'd it go?" she asked with impatience, although I knew she already had an idea of the answer. I could almost see her, sitting at her rustic wooden table, piles of thick, unruly black hair cascading over her fair, refined face, her black eyes sparkling with precognitive anticipation of my reply. After all, Analetta was gifted, being able to see past, present, and future in many cases. Her Native American Snoqualmie father and her Gypsy mother left little chance that she would go through

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life without such gifts, having inherited them from both sides of her family. She'd volunteered to take on the expansive task of teaching Zari about the ways of the hairless ones. Even though he appeared human, he also needed to be able to embrace my culture. Having been raised in the wildest of areas atop the majestic mountainous regions of Vancouver Island, he'd seldom encountered a hairless human, as we were called— until he met me, so trying to adjust to my life in civilization took a gargantuan effort.

I paused and looked up before responding to Analetta's question, listening carefully to make sure my parents weren't in earshot of my conversation.

"It was rough," I whispered. "But the good news is that they're going to allow us to see each other!" I shivered with excitement as I delivered the news.

"I told you it would be OK. I guess I better hurry and try to bring Zari up to speed on all things human," she trilled. "I'm sure you want to talk to him," she quipped as she handed the phone to Zari.

"They're going to let us see each other!" I gushed, twisting a strand of hair as I heard him pick up the phone. However, there was only silence on the other end as I spoke. In the background, I could hear Analetta telling him to speak into the "box" while holding it to his ear.

"Gracie?"

I heard his deep, rich voice as I felt an electric charge shoot through me.

"I'm here, can you hear me?" I answered, realizing how difficult it was and would be for Zari to embrace technology since the Forest People rejected it, choosing instead to live a much simpler and idyllic lifestyle.

"Yes," came the muted reply.

I smiled, remembering how Zari had avoided my cell phone like it was poisonous. Now, in order for him to pull off the ultimate charade, that of being one of my kind, he had to learn to embrace that which he disliked and found to be so foreign to his nature. I could visualize his beautiful tan face, scrunched up in a boyish frown as he spoke, a shock of deep auburn hair, highlighted in blonde, framing his face, with his large emerald green eyes reflecting the soft light from the fireplace in Analetta's cozy little cottage. I sighed deeply at the image in my mind.

"Well," I continued. "The worst of it is over. My parents aren't going to try and stop us from seeing each other. I'm so excited! Everything is falling into place."

The tentative voice on the other end responded in an almost excited whisper, "That's fantastic! I can't wait. That way I can see you every day! Oh, by the way, Analetta tells me I have to go to school. I'm not comfortable with this, Gracie, but she's been teaching me to write your language. She's also been working on obtaining some

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kind of papers to get me enrolled. We had to choose a last name also. What do you think of Mitchell? My love, you're going to have to help me through this. I don't like your world, and I'm not comfortable in it, but I'll do whatever it takes to be with you. I have to be honest though, I'm afraid and you know that's not my nature."

"I know. I'll do everything I can to make it easier on you. Mitchell's fine, by the way. I think that's a great last name. My initials won't even have to change." I paused as the realization of what I was asking of Zari crashed upon me, causing me to remember how lost and afraid I'd felt in his world at first. I was expecting a lot and I knew it, but he'd chosen to take this path, and I had faith he would succeed.

3

Hurt Feelings



The doorbell rang as I shoved my backpack into the closet. I was tired and didn't pay any attention until I heard voices downstairs. It was Garrett. I took a deep breath as I grappled with what I was going to tell him. I knew I had to break the engagement with him and it wasn't going to be pleasant. I never would've agreed to marry him if I hadn't thought Zari was dead. I wished his arrival could've waited a little longer since I was already exhausted from the traumatic day I'd endured. There wasn't any time for preparation, though, when I heard him bounding up the stairs two at a time.

"Hey, gorgeous!" Garrett exclaimed as he stuck his head around the door, a huge grin on his face, azure eyes sparkling with excitement. I stood still and just stared at him as he ran to me and picked me up, twirling around and trying to kiss me. My lack of response shocked him and he put me down immediately and stepped back.

"What's wrong?"

"Have a seat, Garrett. We need to talk." I sat on the edge of my canopy bed while Lashi jumped up and curled himself up against me, sensing trouble. Garrett seated himself in the overstuffed pink chair, rigid with anticipation. I couldn't help but notice how handsome he was, and how tall he had grown over the summer. His dark brown hair was a little longer and shined lustrously in the rays of sunlight streaming in from

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outside as he sat in silence. It seemed, however, that his dark hair mirrored the expression on his face and his blue eyes seemed to deepen in color like ominous clouds boiling before a dangerous storm.

“Garrett,” I began. “I do love you. Something’s happened, though.” I paused and brushed my hair back from my face, trying to rein in my emotions as I felt tears welling up in my eyes. I glanced down momentarily at the ring on my left hand as if for moral support. *Be strong*, I reminded myself before clearing the lump in my throat and continuing. “Do you remember? I went on this trip to make sure we were really supposed to be together. I told you that. I was having doubts before I left, and that’s why I did it. Well, I met someone while I was away, and he’s right for me. Even though I’ll always love you, I’m not *in* love with you and there’s a difference. You can love a lot of people in your life, but to be *in* love is rare and precious. It wouldn’t be fair to you if we continued with my heart not totally yours. I’m so very sorry, the last thing I wanted to do was hurt you. I hope we can still remain friends.” It felt like I was only a spectator as the scene unfolded, the words seeming robotic as I spoke, even to the point of an overused cliché.

Garrett was silent for a moment, a mixture of tears and fury fueling the raging storm mounting in his eyes. Finally, he sputtered, “I can’t believe it. I don’t even know what to say to you, Grace! I don’t know which is worse, the anger I feel right now or the hurt. You said you would marry me and that you loved me. Were you just lying? Did you ever really feel anything for me? It sure seemed like it, or you’re the biggest phony ever.” Garrett grappled with control, wanting to shout before continuing. “You’ve cheated on me all along, haven’t you? You just used me. First, there was this guy in New York that supposedly died, and now there’s this European idiot. God help you, Grace, I hope you’ve found what you want, or more likely, deserve.”

I opened my mouth, but before I could speak, Garrett stood abruptly and stormed out of the room muttering sarcastically. “Have a good life, Grace.”

As I sat on the pink satin comforter, stunned by the scene that had just transpired, I hurt so much that I felt physical pain in my chest. I never intended to hurt Garrett or Zari, much less my family. Nevertheless, here I was, Zari struggling with enormous effort, attempting to fit in with my foreign culture to please me. That didn’t even start to address my parents, upset and angry, thinking I was making a huge mistake. But most of all, I hurt for Garrett, who had done nothing wrong other than to love me unconditionally, and now, he was feeling betrayed and angry from my rejection, not to mention the devastation from his broken heart. I lay back amidst the abundant array of pink and white pillows on my bed in agony, weeping bitterly and wishing I’d never been born.

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It seemed like a long time before I heard footsteps at the door of my room. Mom peeked in before asking, "Are you alright? Garrett was very upset when he left. I guess you told him?"

I sat upright while Lashi adjusted himself to stay as close to me as possible on the bed.

"I don't know, Mom. It seems no matter what I do, I hurt everyone I love and have come in contact with. I can't stand myself."

Mom sat beside me, pulling me to her. "Oh, baby, it's just growing pains. Everybody gets hurt in this life. It's just the nature of things. I love you and I promise, everything's going to work out, it just takes a little time, that's all."

I clung to Mom and cried inconsolably. I never intended to hurt anyone, especially Garrett. As I wept, Analetta's warning crossed my mind. *My dear, you must be careful with this boy. He loves you and it will be wrong to discard him without regard for his feelings. If Zari returns, then you will be forced to choose between them. They both are in love with you and both possess outstanding qualities. I sense you love Garrett also. It's not an enviable position because if Zari does reappear, it won't be as easy a decision as you think and you'll hurt one of them and yourself in the process.* I recalled how, at the time, all I could think about was Zari, having no consideration for Garrett. Shame swept over me, intensifying the pain. *Analetta was right, I think I hurt as much as Garrett must,* I thought as another wave of anguish crashed over me. For once, I was glad Mom was quiet and not offering motherly advice. I clung to her, thankful for the comforting warmth of my mother's unconditional love while my mind spun in a million directions, trying to decide what I could do to make things better, if anything.

4

Exposed



It had been a very long night. I awakened puffy eyed and hoarse, the aftermath of lots of tears. School wouldn't start for a couple of weeks, and I was thankful because it would give Garrett some time to recover from the pain I'd inflicted before I would see him at school. I planned to go to Analetta's and spend time with Zari because I knew things would be better in his arms. Besides, I wanted to see how he was feeling about his new adventure into civilization. A part of me worried that he'd be so overwhelmed that he might decide that he couldn't handle being a part of my complicated world. Still, I'd seen how brave he was and felt he would follow through for my sake, if nothing else.

It was a lazy Saturday morning and I'd slept in. As I blinked repeatedly in an attempt to bring the world into focus, memories of the previous day resurfaced, causing a new wave of pain to wash through me. I lay still for some time, staring, as golden rays of sunlight filtered through my east facing window. I was still tired, even after substantial sleep, I decided. I'd needed it, though, after the exhausting events of the previous day.

As I thought about Zari and my life with the Forest People, I decided I missed it. With the exception of my parents and brother, the main thing I missed when I spent

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time with them was my bed. It was soft and plush, unlike the bed of leaves I shared with Telacki in the cave where my forest family dwelt. *About now, I'd be sitting beside a small fire in the large front room of the cave, cooking a skewer of meat of unknown origin for breakfast,* I thought fondly. My stomach growled in protest at my thoughts as I sat up on the side of the bed, my hair sticking out in every direction. *Food,* I thought. *I've missed that also.* That was the other deficiency in my life with the Forest People. Their simple diet of meat and berries, along with wild vegetables, was bland. *I missed all the foods that I crave, especially Mom's spaghetti and homemade chocolate chip cookies,* I thought as I staggered from my bed to the closet, grabbing a white, gauzy peasant top and blue jeans. Lashi wagged his tail and jumped from the bed, following me, clearly agreeing that breakfast was long overdue.

My family sat in the breakfast nook, eating in uncomfortable silence. Patrick was uncharacteristically quiet and only nodded at me as I approached the table. He obviously had been informed of my news. I had no doubt he was upset with me, due to his friendship with Garrett.

"Do you want some breakfast, honey?" Mom forced a smile. She looked as if she hadn't slept with dark circles visible under her vivid blue eyes.

"Sure, Mom. Thanks. I'm going to Analetta's after breakfast," I said as I took my normal seat at the table. The large puffy apple pancake in the center of the table smelled amazing. I hadn't indulged in this weekend family ritual in months and I'd missed it. Lashi sat patiently beside me, staring expectantly and drooling at the thought of a stray piece of bacon from the plate beside the pancake.

As I looked around the table, only Mom would look at me as another wave of pain crashed upon me. *My brother, my parents, who else will I hurt?* I thought as I fought back tears.

Finally, Dad looked up.

"Be home before dark. Are we clear on this?" I nodded and flinched when I looked up to see the disapproving stare in his eyes. Silently, I wolfed down my breakfast. I couldn't wait to bolt from uncomfortable quiet at the table and the tension I felt from my family. Still chewing the last bite, I rose quickly, moving rapidly to the sink to rinse my dishes before putting them in the dishwasher.

I raced up the stairs and readied myself quickly before rushing out the front door with Lashi. We jumped in my Mustang and its engine roared to life as Lashi panted, his head hanging over the console from the back seat. I had to resist the urge to speed while on the main street since I couldn't wait to feel the comfort of Zari's arms.

As I turned onto the dirt logging road that led to Analetta's cottage, I breathed a sigh of relief. It felt welcoming as I drove deeper and deeper into the lush green, old

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growth evergreen forest, its mighty giants towering above me in all of their majesty. It seemed like it went on forever before I turned right onto the long, winding driveway leading to Analetta's isolated cottage. It was inviting and peaceful, nestled in an abundance of gardens with fruit and flowering trees and plants of all types, lovingly cared for by the couple. An odd mixture of stone and wood, the cottage gave the appearance of an oversized fairy house and the crooked appearing rock fireplace gave it a surreal look as smoke wafted sleepily upward from the rounded stones of the chimney.

I jumped from the car along with Lashi about the time I saw Zari racing down the oversized cobblestone walkway toward me. His shiny, dark auburn hair with emblazoned blond highlights glistened in the sunlight as he embraced me, picking me up as if I were no more than a feather. He was in his natural form, that of the Forest People, muscles rippling and nearly seven feet tall with waist length hair. As he placed me gently down, he tilted my head upwards and swept the hair from my face. He looked deeply into my eyes, even through my soul and then kissed me slowly and tenderly as chills raced down my spine and my desire for him was unleashed.

"I love you, Gracie. I was so worried about you. I missed you *so* much," he whispered when we finally parted. His emerald green eyes filled with emotion as he spoke, pulling me to him and touching our foreheads together, a sacred gift given to the Forest People when committed to one another to facilitate the unfettered sharing of our lives. As we joined, our auras swirled in rainbows of colors as our souls and spirits merged, baring our lives to each other. We stood frozen, entranced by the depth of our love and the intertwining of our essence, under a blue canopy of clematis flowers, growing over an arched arbor that stood over the cobblestone path. Time was irrelevant and unimportant, it was only the two of us, and nothing else mattered or existed.

Unexpectedly, Lashi growled with a menacing curl of his lips. Zari stepped back immediately, shoving me behind him before bolting toward the forest edging the property with dizzying speed. I saw movement in the periphery of the tree line and to my horror, I saw Garrett trying unsuccessfully to outrun Zari's charge. I sprinted toward them about the time Zari grabbed Garrett and threw him to the ground before picking him up by his neck and shaking him.

"Stop! Zari, don't hurt him!" I screamed. I was hysterical, knowing how easy it was for the Forest People with their strength and mental gifts to overpower and kill my kind. "Please, I'm begging you, Zari. You know it's death to kill one of my kind."

Slowly, Zari put Garrett down, but still held him firmly by the neck, paralyzing him by sending waves of his supernatural energy flowing over him. Zari glanced momentarily at me, his eyes emitting fiery red light in his fury. I realized how terrifying

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he must look to Garrett, not only in size, but in demeanor. About that time, Garrett had the poor judgment to attempt to squirm free, taking advantage of the distraction, but his fruitless efforts only caused Zari to tighten his grip and increase his paralytic and terrifying energy. Garrett gasped for air as he swayed and his knees buckled, close to unconsciousness.

“Please, Garrett, just be still and don’t say anything,” I pleaded.

I looked at Zari helplessly, knowing he would like nothing more than to inflict more pain on this boy, his rival for my affection. It didn’t matter that I’d chosen him, since he’d read Garrett’s thoughts. I felt the magnitude of his anger and jealousy, and it was alarming. Zari knew of Garrett’s desire for me as well as his horror at seeing him in his natural form. This ignited a jealousy as green as his emerald eyes and a rage just as fierce. I reached out cautiously and placed my hand on Zari’s arm in an attempt to calm him and diffuse the situation. He flinched imperceptibly at my touch and marginally lessened his attack.

Garrett, though terrified and weakened from the force of the energy unleashed on him, tried to look defiant as he stared in disbelief at his captor and me. As we stood at the perimeter of the clearing, it seemed that nobody knew what to say or do as an uncomfortable silence consumed us while Lashi sat at my feet and whined softly.